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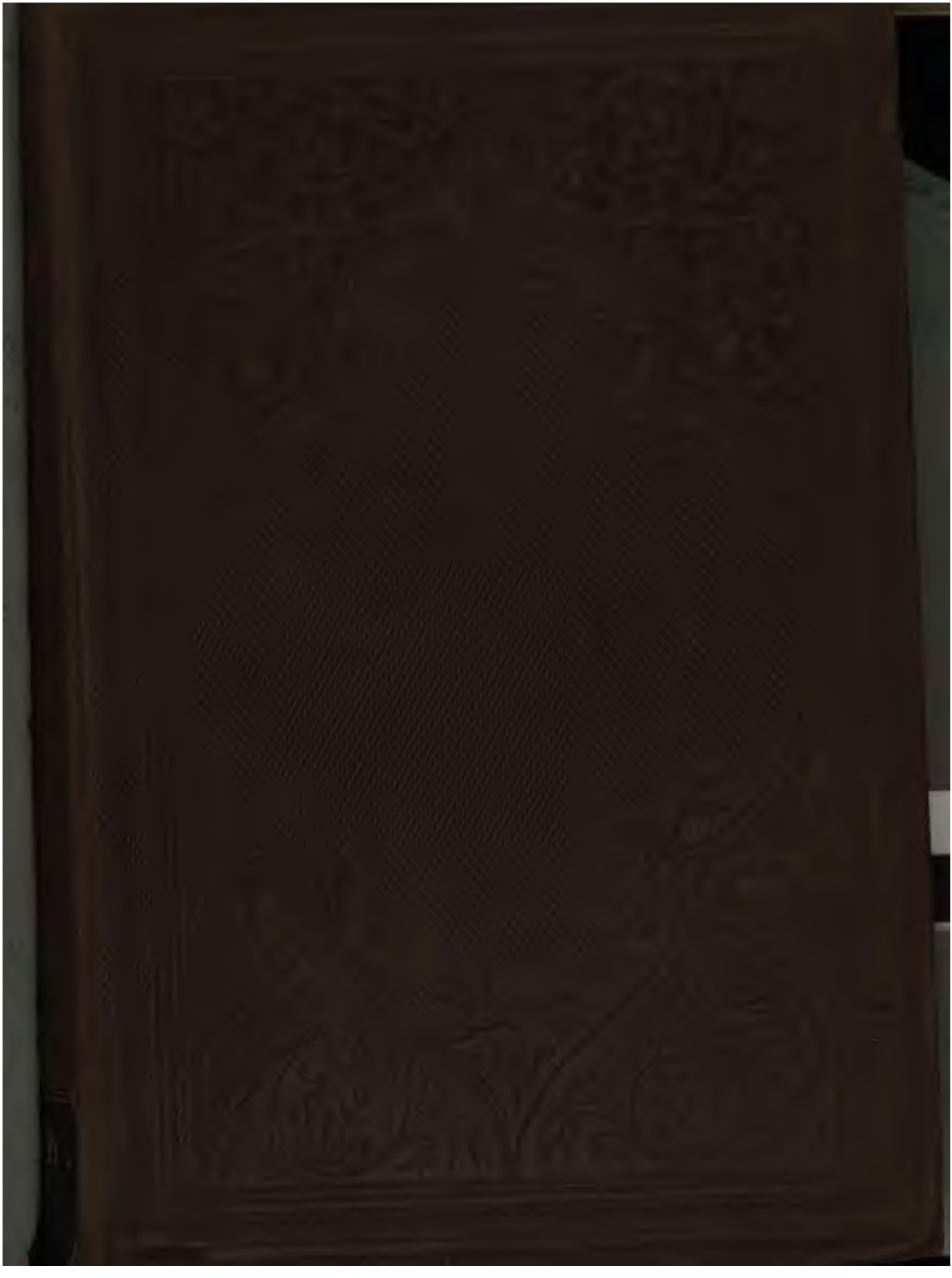

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MARIETTA.

A Novel.

BY

T. ADOLPHUS TROLLOPE,

AUTHOR OF

"LA BEATA," "FILIPPO STROZZI," "A DECADE OF ITALIAN WOMEN," ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:

CHAPMAN & HALL, 193, PICCADILLY.

1862.

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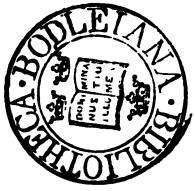
250. h. 65.

LONDON:
BRADBURY AND EVANS, PRINTERS, WHITEFRIARS.



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MARIETTA.

CHAPTER I.

UP TO TOWN TO SEE THE LANDLORD.—IN TUSCANY.

A SPECIAL beauty, and a character peculiarly its own, was held in the days of Dante to mark the Tuscan valley of the Casentino; and its rich woods and abundant waters have still the same charm which they possessed five centuries ago, intensified by the glorifying halo which the genius of the world-poet has thrown around the spot. The "Casentino" is the name of that part of the upper valley of the Arno which lies between its source in the flank of Falterona—that stalwart bulwark of the main chain of the Apennine—and the point where the river, sweeping round the base of a long and lofty spur of the mountains called the Prato Magno, begins to shape its course towards Florence in a direction almost exactly the reverse of that in which it has been previously running. And this far jutting spur of the Apennine, which thus lies between the upper and the lower valleys of the river for a distance of about twenty-five miles, is in fact but the prolonga-

tion of the huge mass of Falterona itself. So that to come out of the Casentino to Florence, it is necessary to cross the neck of this high ground, striking the river again in its lower course, some twelve miles above the capital; unless, indeed, the traveller prefer to follow the entire devious course of the Arno, which would make his journey, from the centre of the Casentino to Florence, some seventy or eighty miles, whereas by the excellent road across the mountains, the distance is not above forty.

It was by this latter road that farmer Carlo Palli, and his son, Giovanni, were travelling up to the capital on a May morning, in one of the earlier years of this century. *Farmer* Palli, I have said, because the familiar idea associated with that title conveys to an English reader, most readily, an adequate picture of the outward man and social status of the wealthy Casentino agriculturist. But, strictly speaking, Signor Palli was not a farmer, but a "Fattore," or agent, or land-steward. He cultivated and entirely managed the large estates of the Marchese Ferdinando Perini, but he did not farm any part of them; that relationship between landlord and cultivator being unknown in the Casentino, as in most of the other parts of Tuscany.

The estates, which had been acquired by the father of the present marquis during the time of the French occupation,—for the Perini were quite new men, turned up to the top of Fortune's wheel by some of the rapid and strange whirls characteristic of that period,—were situated not far from Poppi; the picturesque little town which, perched with its old castle on the top of an entirely isolated rock, in the very middle of the valley of the Casentino,

seems to be the natural capital of the rich and smiling district beneath and around it.

The residence of the Fattore was raised a little above the level of the rich plains on the last slope of the mountain enclosing the valley. It consisted of a stern and melancholy looking square old feudal fortress tower, around which a confused crowd of barns, and stables, and outhouses, and pigsties seemed to be performing a *debraillé* dance, in mockery of the grey and gloomy senior in the centre of them;—a picturesque dwelling enough, and looking, as seen from a distance in the valley, more like a village than a single habitation. As Querceto—for that was the name of Signor Palli's homestead—was only a few miles from Poppi, and therefore situated in the very middle and most fertile part of the Casentino, it is clear that he had about twelve miles to travel before reaching the bottom of the long and steep ascent, which climbs the mountain ridge above described.

The Fattore, and his son, had started from home with the earliest light of the May morning, and it was not more than half-past six when they began to ascend the first of these zig-zags, by which the well-engineered road winds its way up the steep side of the Apennine. They had done the twelve miles in somewhat less than an hour and a-half, and the active, well-fed, and well-groomed pony which drew the light *calessino*, in which they travelled, settled himself to his work against the collar, and stepped out as freshly and willingly as if he were but at the commencement of his day's journey. An excellent and most useful race of animals are these nimble and fine-limbed, yet hardy and enduring little Tuscan ponies;

and the traveller who can succeed in emancipating himself from the laws and customs laid down for the forwarding of gentlemen tourists on their way, sufficiently to secure one of them and a *calessino*, instead of a *vetturino* with his regulation cumbrous carriage, with its two or four meagre horses, may calculate on leaving the "leathern convenience" at least half a day's journey behind him in the four-and-twenty hours. But he must content himself with such a carriage as that in which Carlo Palli and his sturdy son are now coming up the hill. It consists of as light a pair of shafts, springs, and wheels as can be put together with sufficient strength to support a backless seat, just sufficient for two persons, fixed about fourteen or fifteen inches above the axle. Sometimes this simple vehicle has a light floor for the feet of the sitters; but more frequently the place of this is supplied by a net-work of rope for greater lightness. Neither the carriage itself nor the seat has any back, but the latter is generally made of great width, and supplied with a thick cushion, so as to resemble very much the seat in a Venetian gondola. There are many less comfortable seats in this world than that of a Tuscan *calessino* the reader may rest assured.

Had it been otherwise, indeed, it may be safely assumed that Signor Palli, the wealthy Fattore of Querceto, would have found some other means of conveying his portly person to the capital. But he felt not the least temptation to abandon the traditional *calessino*, the favourite means of locomotion with Tuscans of all classes. But *calessini*, like other things, may be made to indicate very clearly the standing and social condition of their possessors; and

that of Signor Palli was *point device* in every respect. The handsome little pony's harness was highly ornate. A long red worsted tassel hung on each side of his head. Every portion of the harness was studded with large-headed brass nails, as bright as rubbing could make them. The narrow little saddle, on which the shafts hung, rose into a peak nine inches high, similarly ornamented. The reins were of bright red worsted cord, half an inch in diameter. The body of the little carriage itself was not painted, but of the natural colour of the wood highly varnished; and the broad amply-cushioned seat was covered with a very handsome and gay-coloured bit of new-looking Brussels carpet. Very evidently to all Tuscan eyes the *calessino* of a well-to-do Fattore!

And the appearance of the occupants of the carriage was equally indicative of their being first-class specimens of their kind. The father might be about five-and-forty, and the son some twenty years of age; and they were so strikingly alike, that the only difference between them seemed to be the greater width, breadth, and circumference of the former. Face, shoulders, chest, stomach, hands, feet, had been developed into at least fifty per cent. of increased horizontal extension in the case of the senior. But they were the same middle height; they had the same ruddy bronzed hue of health in their round faces, the same short stiff black hair, the same large round bright brown eyes and brilliant teeth; which, together with frank-looking, well-formed mouths, and firm broad chins, entitled both of them to be considered unquestionably handsome men; and the same genial, good-humoured expression of countenance—human types, in short, as wholly unlike that which

forms the popular English notion of an Italian as could well be; unlike also to the population of the cities and of the other parts of Italy, but very common among the rural classes in Tuscany.

Later in the day, when they have doffed their upper wrappings, such differences of costume as become the different stages they have reached on their life-journey may be remarked. But now, as they begin to mount the hill, both still sitting in the carriage, instead of getting down to warm themselves and ease the good little horse (for they are Tuscans and not Englishmen), the likeness of the two figures is completed by perfect similarity of dress. For the daybreak hours are still cold in the Casentino, the climate of which is considerably more rigorous than that of the lower valley of the Arno; and father and son are both muffled to the eyes in huge chocolate-coloured great-coats, turned up and seamed with green, and garnished with high collars of black sheepskin.

"The seasons have never been the same they used to be, ever since the French dogs came into Tuscany,—may apoplexies catch them!" said the father, as the good little horse subsided into a walk, when he began to feel the hill. "I wish I may never cross the Consuma again, if it is not as cold this May morning as if it were January!"

"It is freshish," replied his son, pulling up the fur collar of his coat around his ears. "But *I* was on the Consuma" (the highest point of the pass over the mountain is so called) "at four o'clock in the morning last January, and the hairs on my lip were so many icicles, per Bacco! They say the seasons *are* changing; but I for my part do not think the French have anything to do with the matter."

"Changing!" grumbled the senior; "I should think they were! *altro!* * Why, when I was your age, we used to harvest in the Casentino at the time they do in the Valdarno now-a-days."

"Have a cigar?" rejoined his son, rummaging in the pocket of his great-coat for a twist of paper containing a dozen or so of the long, slender, black cigars made of German-grown tobacco, and supplied at something under a farthing apiece, by a paternal Government, to its people, by every class of whom they are consumed in incredible quantities. "Have a cigar?" said the young man, thinking, apparently, that the readiest mode of proving to his sire that the world was not yet gone altogether to the bad. "Here, I will give you a light," he added, as he drew a match unprotected by any box from his waistcoat pocket, and proceeded to light it, holding the flame within the hollow of his two hands, used lantern-wise, in a manner that must have scorched any palms less hard than horn.

So the burly Fattore, who, as soon as the pony had begun to walk instead of trotting, had tied the reins to the iron rod that formed the side of the carriage seat, and sat with his arms folded across his broad chest, accepted the propitiatory offering; the young man lighted another cigar for himself, and they pursued their way up the zig-zag road between the chestnut woods, for a while in silence.

It is a singularly pretty bit of road, that gradual ascent from out of the Casentino to the high and bleak range of country, which separates it from the

* *Altro.* "Other." The sense of this ever-recurring Italian expression is, "other than," or "more than, that;" and is equivalent to "I should think so!" "You may say that!" &c.

Valdarno. The two valleys are strikingly different in the character of their scenery. In the upper valley, more closely confined and by higher mountains, the chestnut on the lower slopes, and the beech and pine on the higher flanks of the mountains, give the tone of colouring to the landscape, instead of the olive which, by its predominance, imparts the pervading grey tint so peculiarly characteristic of the scenery around Florence. The prevailing colour of the soil too in the Casentino is red, instead of the pale marl and stone tints of the Valdarno. The characteristic cypresses, which make so remarkable a feature in the remembrance of every visitor to Florence, are almost entirely absent from the landscape of the Casentino; and, in a word, the greater abundance of water, the greater prevalence of rain, and the colder climate, combine to give to the higher valley a greener, more pastoral and less markedly southern character than that of the storied environs of Florence. To northern eyes, which have not yet acquired a feeling for the altogether peculiar and somewhat colourless beauties of Florentine landscape, the scenery of the Casentino would appear by far the more beautiful of the two singularly contrasted valleys. And, indeed, if the outward eye only be consulted, if memory and association be allowed no voice in the appreciation, the Casentino greenery and pine-clad mountain-tops must, perhaps, be allowed to eclipse the grey world and purple-hazed hills of the "Flower of Cities" on the Arno.

Before their cigars were finished, the Fattore and his son were emerging from the dusk and the shelter of the chestnut woods into the broad morning light and shelterless bleakness of the upper part of the hill,

and the sun was rising in grand splendour over the tops of the main chain of the Apennine.

"I say, Babbo,"* quoth Giovanni, suddenly, "I shall have to sit upon the wheel presently. You should not take above three-quarters of the seat!"

"Three-quarters! *figliuolo mio!*" returned his father, with a great haw-haw; "if the saints give me grace to go on for the next five years as I have for the last, I shall certainly need the whole *calessino* to myself. To God be the praise! But, Madonna Santa! I am as empty as a friar's wallet, when he starts from his convent. Wait till I get my breakfast, and then see about sitting on the wheel!"

"We'll be at the Consuma in less than an hour now," said the young man, "and then we will see whether old Aunt† Assunta has not got a juicy ham from the oak woods round Prato Vecchio in prime cut."

"And if she has not one in the primest cut, she shall cut a fresh one, per Bacco!"

"And the pretty Ninetta shall fry us such a platter of rashers."

"Good! And you won't poke your nose too close over the fire as she is doing it; do you hear, *figliuolo mio!* Aha! you thought I did not see, the last time we came over from Florence! Set a thief to catch a thief! It won't do, Nanni,‡ my boy. Remember, we have other fish to fry in *that* pan than any that can be caught on the top of the Consuma!"

* "Papa," or "daddy," rather; the universally used familiar address of a Tuscan son of any age or class to his father.

† The Tuscan familiar phrase in speaking of an old woman;—mother so and so, as we should say.

‡ Short for Giovanni.

"Yes! I know all about it, Babbo! Your heart is set on making a match between me and cousin Laura; but don't you set too much store on what, so far as I can see, there's little chance of. Laura won't look at me, as I have told you, and mother too, before now. But as for little Ninetta there, at the Consuma, I never thought about her half a minute after she was out of my sight, pretty girl as she is."

"That is all very well. But as for Laura,—we shall see! we shall see, *bambino mio!* But what about the wine?" he added suddenly, turning to a more immediately pressing matter; "I cannot drink Aunt Assunta's vat-washings, you know, *perdinci!*"*

"Possess thy soul in peace, my father," returned the young man; "I have a flask of excellent Pomino, very carefully secured under the seat here. It is some of that which Tonino, the Bishop's Fattore, sent us as a present two years ago.† I hope the Bishop drinks as good."

"That, it seems to me, is truly too much to hope, my son," replied the jolly Fattore, with a sly chuckle. "'Twere odd indeed if a Fattore did not know the choicest barrel, and odder still if, knowing it, he did not prefer it for his own use. I suspect friend Tonino of no such stupidity; nor do I think he would send me aught save the best. And right glad shall I be to have a flask of it for breakfast this cold morning.

* *Perdinci* is a sort of euphuism used by those who scruple to say "Per Dio." It is elliptical for "Perdinci Bacco." And it has been suggested that the word was originally a corruption of "Per Dionisio Bacco." *Se non è vero, è ben trovato.*

† The small farm, which produces this choice wine, belongs to the Bishop of Fiesola, and is situated in the valley just under the Consuma on the right hand of our travellers.

Bravo, *figliuolo mio!* Good boy! If you steal a kiss from Ninetta while she is frying the ham, I won't look; always understanding, mind you, that the remembrance of it is to last no longer than you spoke of just now."

And by this time the steepest part of the ascent had been climbed; and the pony, unadmonished save by a word, started off at a brisk trot, and soon brought the travellers to a stand before the low-arched doorway of a long, low, whitewashed building, in which Assunta Dei and her pretty daughter received travellers, at the Consuma.

It was not long before the pony was comfortably enjoying his mess of meal in the stable, and the Fattore and his son were seated opposite each other, with a smoking pile of rashers, and the flask of Pomino between them. We will not enquire too anxiously into all that may have passed during their preparation in the frying pan. It was undoubtedly natural enough that Nanni should get as close to the fire as he could after his cold drive; and his father was quite as good as his word; for he was busily engaged in inspecting the ham, from which Aunt Assunta was cutting the rashers, and insisting, with very perfect knowledge of the subject, in directing her knife to select the choicest portions of the joint.

For awhile the two travellers were wholly occupied with the business of "restoring" themselves after their cold morning drive. But when this had been satisfactorily accomplished, two-thirds of the generous Pomino still remained in the flask. For the legal contents of a Tuscan flask, be it known, are seven pounds' weight of wine, or, in words conveying a more definite idea to an English mind, somewhere about half a gallon.

And the two Casentino rustics, though as sober men as any teetotalers, had no idea of leaving a drop of the precious liquor behind them. They were in no wise pressed for time; for they did not intend to reach Florence that night. The good little nag would have done the journey, but it would have been rather too long a one for him; and comfortable Carlo Palli had no notion of overworking either man or beast. Besides, the Fattore rather liked the opportunity of supping and passing the evening with his old friend the parish priest of San Clementi at Pelago, a little town about twelve miles from Florence. It was his usual custom to do so, on his visits to the capital. The journey was thus made an easy one, and the arrangement was pleasant to all parties concerned, the pony included. Besides, as the Fattore said, "What is the use of tiring oneself. Surely we have every reason to think, blessed be the Madonna, that to-morrow will be as good a day as to day." So the farmer and his son had plenty of time to finish their flask of wine at leisure, while the pony rested after his morning's stage.

"Nanni, my son," began the Fattore, as they sat with the flask between them, "to do thee justice, I don't know a boy just out of his teens with a better judgment in the matter of a flask of Chianti or Pomino than thou hast; but truely in some things thou art little better than a gaby."

"May be!" replied Nanni, in no wise nettled; "this wine is the right thing any how. I am safe to know that. As for the other things, I suppose I am as you say, for cousin Laura told me exactly the same thing the last time I was in Florence."

"Humph! She did, did she? And thereupon

thou showedst thy wisdom by concluding that the girl will none of thee! Now listen to me, *figliuolo mio*. If the noble and wealthy Marchese, my respected master, had a son of thy inches, and as much of a gaby, we will say, as thou, dost thou think, that Laura would say him nay?"

"How can I tell?" returned Nanni; "I would say no ill of Laura. But titles and riches do dazzle girls, we all know."

"Don't talk to me about titles," answered his father; "they are coin that can buy very little now-a-days, in the Tuscan market at least. But if my brother Beppe had to choose for his daughter between his nephew Nanni Palli on the one hand, and the Marchese Perini's heir on the other, I know which he would choose. But then elderly jewellers, who have done a good trade in money lending for the last ten years, are not apt, I suppose, to be dazzled, as thou sayest, by wealth."

"I should have thought uncle Beppe a man to look sharply after the main chance, I confess," said Nanni; "and that is why I can't think, that in such a case as you suppose, he would choose as you say."

"Can't think! Then thank the saints that thou hast got a father who can think for thee. Now listen; for it's about time that thou shouldst know which stone the cat lies under. Thou knowest the fat lowland meadows of the Stagneto, I suppose?"

"Altro! All along the bank of the river from the Fossa del Prato to the chapel of San Simone. I should think so. The best land on the estate."

"Much the best," said the Fattore, smacking his lips as he set his glass down with a ring after a long draught; "I am glad thou knowest that much.

Well! the Stagneto meadows will be found to stand in the registrar's books, not in the name of the noble Marchese Perini, but in that of one Carlo Palli, a hard-working old fellow, tolerably well known in those parts."

"You don't mean that you have bought the Stagneto?" asked his son.

"Bought the land and paid the hard cash seven years ago. Dost thou chance to remember the Vigna del Vescovo, and the tillage land stretching away behind it up to the edge of the chestnut wood?"

"To be sure! I set aside half a dozen barrels of last year's vintage off the Vigna del Vescovo for home use only yesterday. The best wine on the property."

"Very right, my boy. Who has so good a right to the best as the owner? The Vigna del Vescovo, and the corn lands behind it, and the wood behind them, changed hands some five years since. They are mine now."

"Why! father, it is half the estate!" cried Nanni, opening his large handsome brown eyes to their widest extent.

"Well," said his father, "if you add the home close and the old house which I bought last year, I suppose it *is* about half,—about half; and the best half certainly."

"Then, after all," rejoined Nanni, "my father's heir, and the Marchese's heir, whoever he may be, might seem to Uncle Beppe not so very different in point of expectations."

"That don't quite follow, Nanni, I think! There's the title, you know!" said his father, with a sudden affectation of humility. "Still, I take it, brother Beppe, if I know him, would be apt to think more

about the title-deeds to the other half of the lands. And do you know, between you and me, I have a strong idea that Beppe Palli, the jeweller, on the Ponte Vecchio, has some very special knowledge respecting those same title-deeds."

"What should he know about them? He is no lawyer," said Nanni, altogether mystified.

"My own idea is that they are in his own strong box, in the iron safe let into the wall in the little room behind the shop on the pier of the bridge," returned the Fattore, drily.

"Why should they be there? What for? I don't understand," asked the young man, innocently.

"Why, *perdinci Bacco!* thou art a gaby after all, *figliuolo mio*," returned his father. "Did you ever know a man to ruin himself half, and then stop? Do you suppose such an animal as Perini, who could spend all the money in Rome, but never earn a penny, who is no more good on earth than a stoat, and deserves nailing to a barn-door, just as much, do you suppose that such a man could come to any end except beggary! *Che, che!* * If Carlo Palli owns one half of the Perini estates, Beppe Palli owns the other half; or may do so, as soon as he thinks fit to foreclose."

"And the *padrone?*" asked Nanni, with a little touch of anxiety in his voice.

"*Padrone!*" echoed the Fattore, with such a sneer as only an Italian can put into a single word; "Padrone! The Marchese Perini is a beggar I tell you—or but little better, at this hour."

* "What! what!" an exclamation for ever in the mouth of a Tuscan, and generally equivalent to "Pooh! pooh!"

"But, father," returned Nanni, hesitatingly and timidly, "are not you afraid . . . . that is, will not people say that the Marchese was ruined, if not *by* being in your hands, at least *while* he was in your hands . . . . and in Uncle Beppe's?"

"People will say," and as he spoke the farmer raised his head and shoulders from their easy slouch over the table into a fiercely erect attitude, while his jolly round face assumed an expression of which it might have been supposed incapable, and his eye gleamed with passion,—"People will say, Giovanni Palli, that the worthless man was ruined because he was worthless; . . . . that he was born to be ruined, and all the saints could not have saved him from it; . . . . that the land should belong to those who can and will work on it, and manage it, and not to ignorant gamblers, incapable of even learning the produce of an acre of vineyard, or the day's work of a yoke of oxen. They will say, that fool Perini has gone the way they are all going, the whole kit of them up there in Florence, turning night into day, and too idle to visit their own estates from year's end to year's end. The land is going from the Signorini to the Fattori, and all right it should! Why, is it not the same thing all round? Look at Borini, the Fattore of the Guadi estates there below Arezzo! Look at old Ambrosio Tani in the Chianti! Look at our friends Bastiano Barbani, and his brother Giacomo, in the Valdarno here below us! Is not the same thing going on all over Tuscany? And right it should! . . . . . So now," he added, relapsing into his attitude and manner of easy *bonhommie*, "finish the flask, give me another cigar, tell Assunta to give us some coffee, go and look after the pony,

and don't talk or think any more nonsense about the Marchese, ... or about Laura."

So Nanni got up, and set himself dutifully to obey all these various behests of his sire,—the first to the letter, and the more difficult last injunction, as far as it was in his power to comply with it. It was impossible for him, as he went out to the stable to see if the little horse had eaten his allowance of meal, and had been properly groomed, not to have his head very full of a very unwonted crowd of thoughts jostling each other in his brain, and making very puzzling confusion in that ordinarily placid and undisturbed mind. This sudden revelation of his father in the character of a wealthy landed proprietor, ... and of himself in perspective in the same position! He had been accustomed from his birth to all the comfort and careless well-being that abundance and quite easy circumstances could give. But to be a gentleman of large estate was something very different from this! As to the means by which such a result had been attained, notwithstanding the doubt, which had on the first hearing of the news rushed up from the bottom of his heart to the surface, it is not to be supposed that he was more delicately scrupulous, than was the general tone of public feeling in the world in which he lived. It was quite true, that the process by which the land was passing from the imbecile hands of an utterly worthless and incapable aristocracy into those of the often dishonest, but often also merely sharp, active, and shrewd agents, who managed their affairs, was going on rapidly on all sides. Hardly a year passed without some noble name, sometimes fine old historic names written in every page of the history of the old Republic, sinking out of sight like a falling star

out of the firmament, and that of some new man of plebeian name and extraction rising into the social heavens in its place, and on its ruins. And the old names were wonderfully quickly forgotten ;—all the quicker, if, as in the case of the Marchese Perini, the ruined man was himself but the creature of yesterday ;—and the new names were admitted to take their places in the society of the rich, and in the respect of the world in general, with very smooth-sailing facility. Nanni was contented to suppose that it *was* all right, as his father said ;—and thought "no more nonsense" on this head.

And then his mind reverted to that other subject, on which he was commanded to think as sensibly. As to the views of his father and his uncle, the matter was now all clear enough, and it was easy to think sensibly with regard to that portion of the subject. He was the only child of Carlo Palli, who owned half the Perini property. His cousin Laura was the only child of Beppe Palli, who held mortgages over the other half. Yes ! the thing was clear enough ! And here Nanni's agricultural mind went off into a whole series of very rational agronomical reflections on the pity and disadvantages of not keeping the property united. The large and admirable accommodation of all kinds at the homestead ! what would the other half of the estate do without them ? Then what murder to cut off the little torrent, which came down through the upper pastures from the meadows, which so needed its waters ! etca. etca. etca. Yes ! yes ! His father was right enough, the lands ought to be kept together . . . and indeed were necessary for the support of the family name,

now that it was to become that of "*Signoroni di alto ceto.*" *

And thus far our friend Nanni thought "no nonsense."

But then his thoughts reverted to Laura, and he set himself to consider whether he was indeed desperately and irremediably in love with her. The fact of his agricultural speculations having spontaneously preceded the thoughts of his cousin in his mind did not seem to enlighten him on the subject, as it perhaps might have enlightened a more practical psychological inquirer. Nanni reflected on Laura's beauty, called up in his mind's eye the graceful picture of her light and sylph-like figure, thought of the sweet music of her silvery laugh, compared her by a rapid *coup d'œil* of memory with all the other girls he knew, and finally decided that he certainly was, and fully purposed being, madly in love with his cousin.

But what of Laura's feelings towards him? She always welcomed him kindly, and seemed glad to see him when he came to Florence; but that, he felt, was not exactly what was needed. There was no forgetting the number of times he had been mortified by the ring of that silvery laughter, directing its music, not with him at others, but with others at him. He remembered all the little railleries, and even the frank good-humour—too frank by half for his aspirations. He could not unsay to himself what he had said to his father, that Laura would never "look at him." At all events she never "had looked at him" yet. Would the change in his position and prospects make a change in this respect? That is

* "Great gentlemen of the high class."

what remains to be seen, said Nanni to himself, as he sauntered into the little inn, to rejoin his father.

"Pony ready, Nanni, my boy?" said his father. "I believe I have had just the smallest taste in the world of a nap. Have you got that place on the wheel ready? for there is a jolly lot of ham and wine here that will want room on the seat. Haw! haw! haw!"

So they started on their way down the long descent into the Valdarno, with the deep-shadowed woods of Vallombrosa on their left, and the more distant mighty mass of Falterona on their right; and the pony trotted warily down the hill with the utmost discretion, though the farmer, who held the reins, was fast asleep within five minutes after leaving the inn, while Nanni, with a cigar in his mouth, was absorbed in meditations on the various considerations which would make it "murder" to separate the two halves of the Perini property.

And nothing more was said between the father and son that evening; for the former slept nearly all the way to Pelago, where they spent the evening and night under the hospitable roof of the priest of the church of San Clemente.

On the next morning early they purposed starting to do the twelve miles which remained of their journey, so as to have the day before them when they arrived at Florence.

CHAPTER II.

THE PONTE VECCHIO.

EARLY the next morning, but not so early as had been their start on the day before, the Fattore and his son were again on the road; and the stout little pony was as fresh and willing as ever. An hour and a half sufficed for the twelve miles to Florence, and that notwithstanding the last four or five had to be performed amid a crowd of vehicles of all sorts, all bound for the city, among which the stout farmer had to find his intricate way by a series of dodgings and crossings enough to break the heart of a more artistic whip, to whom the English "rule of the road" is the golden rule of life.

Despite however all the activity of hand and eye needed to preserve the fragile little *calessino* from constant risks of collision with market-carts and timber-waggons laden with the produce of the forests of Camaldoli, the farmer found time to have a little further talk with his son before they reached the gate of the city.

"I think I won't go to Beppe's this morning, Nanni," began his father; "I'll tell you what we'll

do. We'll get a bit of breakfast at the Pappagallo,* and I'll go to my brother on the bridge, and you shall go and make Laura a visit in the Borgo de' Greci."

"Had I not better go with you to Uncle Beppe's shop, Babbo," said his son; "I am afraid it will be too early for Laura."

"Not a bit of it! Show her that you make yourself at home in your uncle's house. Besides, I have business to speak with Beppe on, that needs only four eyes for the doing of it."

"Is it about the affairs of the Marchese, Babbo?" inquired Nanni.

"It is, *figliuolo mio;* and I don't mind telling you the purport of it. It is only the old story. The spendthrift wants more money;—always the same cry—money, money, money! He'd bankrupt the mint in a month, if you'd let him! The old story! But the difference this time is,—where is the money to come from?"

"But if, as you say, he is already a beggar?" suggested his son.

"Pretty nearly, my boy! Pretty nearly, I said. He is not quite at the end of his tether. When he is, I take it, it will pull him up rather sharp."

"But if one half of the estate is sold, and the other mortgaged all it will bear?" again argued Nanni.

"Nay! you are too much in a hurry, Nanni;—too hard upon the poor man. There is the palace in Florence—one of the real grand old palaces, bought by his father near about the same time that he

* "The Parrot," a hostelry behind the Palazzo Vecchio, much used by the country people, especially those from Signor Palli's part of the country.

bought the estate—Palazzo Perini, as he calls it, and Palazzo Lunardi as all the rest of Florence calls it. The Palazzo Lunardi," he added, after a little pause, "is worth twenty thousand crowns if it's worth a soldo;—dirt cheap at twenty thousand crowns!"

"And has the Palazzo no liabilities on it?" asked the young man.

"As yet, none. He has left that for the last mouthful. Your Florence Signorone always parts with the land first, and holds by the palace to the last."

"And if he wants money now then, it must be raised on that security?"

The Fattore nodded his head slowly three distinct nods, and then said:

"That 's just it, my boy! a lawyer could not have stated the case more exactly."

"And will uncle Beppe lend him on mortgage of the Palazzo?"

"That remains to be seen and to be talked about. And now you know what I am going to Florence for, and what I want to talk to your uncle about in the little room behind the shop on the bridge. Madonna Santa! To think of all the talks with four eyes,* and no more, that have gone on in that little room, and the long faces that have come out of it! And now, *figliuolo mio*, to show you that we will henceforth have no secrets between us, you tell me what Laura says to you at home in the Borgo de' Greci, and I'll tell you what her father says to me in the shop on the Ponte Vecchio. But mark! not a word of all I have told you to Laura, as yet."

* "A quattr' occhi" is the familiar Tuscan phrase for a tête-à-tête.

"All right, Babbo!" said Nanni; "but it's nothing new or secret that I shall have to tell. Here we are at the gate, and, *per Bacco!* may wait an hour to get through, unless we bustle for it."

About an hour afterwards the father and son parted at the door of the Pappagallo, where they were both, as well as the pony, well known and warmly welcomed guests, on their separate errands, as arranged.

We will, for the present, leave to their own devices the lovers, or, as perhaps it might be more accurate to say, the representatives of the two halves of the great Perini property, and proceed to be present at the interview of the two brothers on the Ponte Vecchio.

Everybody who has ever seen Florence has seen and must remember the Ponte Vecchio. There is not a more striking or characteristic bit in the whole city, than that strangely quaint and picturesque specimen of the arrangement so common in the old-world cities of Europe,—a bridge turned into a street by the erection of houses on either side of it, in the place of the modern parapet. Old London Bridge went the way of all the works of human hands, and even its successor has fallen before the onward march of improvement. But things do not move so quickly in Florence,—or, at least, have not hitherto done so. And even in these latter days, when young Florence is competing with other cities in the race of embellishment and modern-idea'd changes, if all the city were polled on the question of substituting a new fabric, however fine, for the venerable Ponte Vecchio, with its double row of queer little old-fashioned shops, and still queerer little dwellings over them, I

hardly think that a dozen voices would be found in favour of the change.

There is a break in the row of houses on either side at the crown of the bridge, which adds much to its picturesque beauty. All the Prout-like charm of its old, many-angled and many-tinted buildings, is by this means combined with that of a most lovely view in both directions, either up or down the river. In the latter direction there is the architecturally beautiful Ponte Santa Trinita, and the stately line of the palaces on the Lungarno for foreground, and for background, first the rich, deep greenery of the Cascine, and far away in the distance the admirably varied line of the high Carrara mountains. Looking up the river, the rich foreground, composed of the grand architectural masses of Vasari's Uffizj on the left hand, and the long line of the backs of the dwellings, rising sheer out of the water, and having their fronts in the Via dei Bardi, on the right hand, —an assemblage of objects shabby enough in the eye of a reforming and beautifying architectural surveyor, but invaluable in that of a sketcher,—is backed by the steep but garden-covered slope of the hill of St. Miniato, and, after including the charmingly picturesque outline and colouring of the old city corn mills, with their weir across the river, is shut in by the vine-covered tops of the Chianti hills. All this feast of beauty is offered to whosoever stands on the top of the Ponte Vecchio, and will take the trouble of only turning his head to the right and to the left to receive and enjoy it.

On the up-stream side of the bridge, the discontinuation of the houses, which shows the above landscape, does not, as on the opposite side, involve a

complete discontinuation of building. The space left between the houses on that side is spanned by an open arcade of three arches, on the top of which is carried that strange corridor which unites the Palazzo Vecchio with the Pitti. This characteristic contrivance of those latter days in Florence, when it was a matter of course that the Sovereign should be hated by and should fear his subjects, was built when, in place of the old rulers of the republic dwelling in the Palazzo della Signoria, a despot had his home in the Palazzo Pitti. The long private passage in question may be seen coming out from a corner of the former building, and by a bridge so high in air as not to catch the eyes of the passers in the intervening street beneath, unless they look absolutely skywards, gaining the neighbouring pile of the Uffizj. The vast extent of this edifice helps the mysterious passenger, —spy, *sbirro*, headsman, assassin, lady fair, or Ducal Highness, less "Serene," mayhap, than usual,—on his secret way as far as the up-stream end of the narrow Via degli Archibusieri, which skirts the river from the Uffizj to the Ponte Vecchio. The private way is carried along the tops of the high houses of this street, crosses it by an arch at the further end at the corner of the bridge, creeps along the roofs of the houses supported by its time-defying piers, spans the interval at the crown of the bridge by means of the arcade above mentioned, resumes its course along the top of the bridge houses, leaps another street, the Via dei Bardi, and so pursues its way to the Pitti, passing through the church of Santa Felicità, *en route*, and piously opening to the traveller by this secret road a view of the high altar, and affording him an opportunity, possibly much needed, of doing

a hurried genuflection, and getting—or, at least, asking—a blessing on his errand. Finally, this most melodramatic of passages reaches its destination in most appropriately melodramatic style, entering the Pitti by a concealed door, opening in the niche of a colossal statue, which most effectually hides it, and would hide at need any one entering from it.

But the scene from the crown of the old bridge was as fair in God's daylight, whatever steps were skulking along the secret path above ; and the variety of mysterious affairs and meetings—queer enough some of them—which took place in the quaint little houses on the bridge, interfered in no wise with the palace secrets, their so-near neighbours.

In the old republican days, when there was no secret passage overhead, there was also little business of a secret nature in the buildings below. For in those times the bridge tenements were occupied by the Florence butchers—men whose affairs do not lie much in the way of secret transactions. But from the time when a Medicean despot decreed that the bridge should no longer be inhabited by butchers, but that in their place the goldsmiths and jewellers of the city should congregate there, the case was otherwise.

Many a spendthrift heir has, in those queer-shaped little back rooms hanging over the river, urged the certainty of his speedy succession to the coffers of a sexagenarian sire, on the consideration of some cautious septuagenarian Shylock, who could not see the force of his arguments. Many a desperate gambler has there found the means of staking the last fragment of his ancestral possessions on a card. Many a fair and noble dame, with her heart-pulses louder than her

light footfall on the flagstones, as she crept in the dusk hour to the bridge instead of to the confessional, has come thither with heirloom gems in her hand, on errands the least blabbing of which would have made it preferable to her to throw herself from the Shylock-den into the dark rushing water beneath it, rather than stay to complete her bargain.

"Mysteries of Florence! being annals of the backshops on the Ponte Vecchio!" Phew! what a record (if one could but get it) of passions raging torrent-wise through every channel, save the normal one! of unrevealed smirchings of noble names and scutcheons, still deemed stainless! of the all too-quickly-revealed final ruin and obliteration of others! of heroic female devotion suicidally revenging itself for having been made incompatible with duty by flinging all its pearls before swine! of every form of human vice and meanness, and of some forms of human virtue and heroism!

A place more characteristically adapted to be the scene of such a series of histories than the interiors of these strange little houses, unlike any other dwellings in the world, it is difficult to conceive. In front a show window, contrived after the fashion of the half-stall shop windows of a couple of centuries ago, and closed at night by an enormous horizontally-hinged shutter projecting out from the front of the building some two or three feet, contains the chief part of the stock in trade of the dealer. A very narrow door, just wide enough for one average-sized figure to pass, is contiguous to the window, and gives access to the shop. This is very small, and in most instances is occupied by the bench and tools of one or two working jewellers rather than by the manufac-

tured results of their labour. A wonderfully small and narrow doorway opposite to that opening on the street leads to the back room, still smaller than the shop, but constituting the sanctum and main scene of the business of those denizens of the bridge, who add a less avowable trade to that of a manufacturing jeweller and goldsmith. In those houses which are built on the massive piers of the bridge, these back rooms stand on the jutting portion of the pier, take the irregular triangular or other queer form of the substructure which supports them, and are somewhat larger than those of the houses which rest on its arches. In the case of these latter, the little back dens are supported by beams projecting in a slanting position out of the solid stonework of the bridge, and are thus suspended over the stream, to which a trap-door in the floor of them would give direct access.

It was in one of the somewhat better houses, standing on one of the piers, on the up-stream side of the bridge, that Giuseppe Palli, the jeweller, and very sufficiently well-known wealthy money-lender, dwelt at the period of this story.

Giuseppe Palli, the brother of our friend the Fattore, and the father of one of the most beautiful girls in Florence, was by no means one of the worst of his tribe. On the contrary, he was probably one of the best of them, and there was little, if anything, in his transactions, that required mystery or secresy, as far at least as *he* was concerned. He held it evident, that when a man wanted money very much, it was a very sufficient proof that the risk of lending it to him was great; and he dealt in risks, understood the nature and qualities of them, and priced them accordingly, with very tolerable fairness. The old Catholic

doctrine that no usance whatever could be unsinfully received for the use of money, cast a deep shade of infamy over the trade of a money-lender, which, as is invariably the result in similar cases, soon taught the majority of the members of a class pronounced infamous by the popular voice to become justly deserving of infamy. Long after the Church had ceased to denounce the taking of interest actively, though, of course, her doctrine on the matter could not be changed, the old stigma remained, and continued to produce the old effects; and even yet the obsolete unreasoning absurdity is not so thoroughly extinguished as to enable men to perceive that it must be equally sinful to take payment for the use of a house as for the use of a sum of money.

So Giuseppe Palli, the well-known accommodating jeweller on the Ponte Vecchio, suffered in some degree from the ill reputation of his trade; though in truth a gentleman in difficulties might have fallen into far more dangerous hands in certain other of the little rooms hanging over the Arno, and no man could say aught worse of him, than that he demanded the same punctuality from his debtors that he practised in his dealings with them, and exacted the pound of flesh, which was by contract his, at the time when it became due. It is true that the value of such risks as friend Beppe dealt in, cannot be ascertained as regularly and accurately as that of a bale of calico or a bushel of corn; and true, also, that the needs and circumstances of his customers were of a nature which prevented them from availing themselves of the protection afforded by the competition of an open market. And both these circumstances must ever tend to make any trade

affected by them a less strictly honest one than others carried on under different conditions. Still I do not think that on the whole Beppe Palli's clients reached their final ruin much more quickly than in the necessary and legitimate order of things. Their vices would have brought it about. He had realised a handsome fortune, certainly, in the course of some five-and-twenty years. But he was a careful and industrious man, rising up early and late taking rest; always gave Mother Church her dues, and kept two wax candles burning before the picture of the Virgin in a conspicuous place in the *front* shop; so there was a blessing on his industry; and he throve accordingly.

He was by ten years the jolly-looking Fattore's senior; and the two were as strikingly contrasted in outward appearance and manner as any two men could well be. Indeed, they were but half brothers, having been the children of different mothers. But (being both more than well-to-do in the world) they always called themselves and felt as brothers. While the burly Fattore might have passed for an Englishman, if you had dressed him like one, the jeweller could never have been taken for aught save the pure-blooded scion of a latin race. His figure was tall and slender, and his face was long and slender. There was nothing really noble in the features of it; but there was much that we northerners are wont to consider aristocratic. The forehead was high and white, but extremely narrow. The Roman nose was very long and very slender, hooked at the end, and with a delicately cut nostril. A large and magnificently brilliant, but very deep-set eye, under a well-defined thick black eyebrow; hollow cheeks,

with prominent and high cheek bones; thick and fleshy, but firm and remarkably well-cut lips, with a very strongly marked cleft in the lower one; a perfectly well-shaved face and lip; a long and pointed chin; a small head, with very little back to it; long, slender, white hands; irreproachably white linen and neat toilet of never-varying finest black cloth coat and trousers, and black satin waistcoat; long, narrow, well-polished shoes and black silk stockings, together with a gold double eyeglass, more frequently in his hand than on the bridge of his nose. Such was the "*signalement*" of Signor Giuseppe Palli, drawn with an accuracy which, I flatter myself, might move the envy of a passport clerk. As for his general manner and deportment, it is sufficient to say, that he looked a good deal older than he was, and that, if he had been presented to a mixed society as senior blue stick in waiting to the King of Spain, or as the General of the Jesuits in mufti, everybody would have been struck by the perfect congruity of his character and appearance.

He and the Fattore knew and appreciated each other thoroughly, and valued each other highly. But though both were men of shrewd and somewhat more than ordinary intelligence, and though Carlo, the younger, was quite as strongly persuaded in his own heart that he, Carlo, was the better and nobler man of the two, as Giuseppe was that *he* was a much superior creature to his rustic brother, yet it so happened that the latter, do what he would, could not help being imposed on and morally walked over and patronised by his dignified and courtly brother.

"If I could but get Beppe into a fustian jacket, brown kersey shorts, and ribbed worsted stockings,

I am sure I could crow the loudest!" the worthy farmer said once to his wife. And it is very probable that he was right. But the jeweller never gave him or any man that chance.

"May I come in, brother?" said the Fattore, almost hermetically closing the little doorway between the front shop and the sanctum behind it, as he wedged himself sideways through the narrow aperture rarely passed by such burly and thriving specimens of humanity.

"Ha, brother Carlo! Welcome to Florence. Come in, come in;—that is if you can; for I think you find it more difficult each time you come up to town. Your fine Casentino air and country living will oblige me to widen my door before long. All well at Querceto?"

"All well, brother, thank you! Have you leisure to give me half an hour this morning for a little talk on business?"

"Always at leisure for such a purpose, my good brother; and always glad of the opportunity to tell you so. I suppose the business is on the old subject?"

"The old subject and the old story, Beppe. But, between you and me, the story is so nearly at an end, that I don't think you will have to widen the door for me, let me fill out as fast as I may. The story is nearly told out; and when it is, why my visits may be made in the Borgo dei Greci, instead of this doll's house, which, craving pardon of you and of the old bridge, is more like a weasel's hole than the dwelling of a Christian."

"It is a weasel's hole, brother, which has served me to realise as good results of my labour in, as those

which you have found in your broad fields. The brain, brother Carlo, requires less space for its operation than the hands need. So now for the business in hand. The dice have been playing the noble Marchese false again! Is not that it?"

"Never was such a run of ill luck! But the Marchese says that it is impossible that it should continue any longer;—it would be against all the calculation of chances! It may be. I don't understand such matters."

"Nor I, I am sure, brother Carlo! the Saints be thanked for it! The Marchese then wishes to try fortune again?"

"Just so, brother Beppe, with a view of recovering, as he says, all that he has lost." And the fat farmer's jovial features relaxed as he spoke into a broad grin, which was answered by a little furtive smile from the eye rather than the lip of the elder brother.

"Well," returned the latter, with a slight shrug, and playing with his gold eye-glass as he spoke, "I suppose it would not be deemed handsome for those who—when all accounts are closed—will have been —more or less—more or less—the gainers by his misfortunes, to refuse him the means of taking his revenge, as I believe it is called. But it is necessary to be cautious. It would not be right towards him to lead him into debts beyond the possibility of discharging them. That, indeed, is the worst of all misfortunes," said the dignified old gentleman, raising his white left hand with out-turned palm deprecatingly, and gravely shaking his aristocratic looking head. "We must be careful, brother Carlo, of our client's honour."

"Look well to the security, you mean," replied his more unsophisticated brother; "that of course."

"Yes! that of course . . . . of course;" replied the elder, gravely nodding. "What is the nature of the Marchese's present proposal?"

"Oh, you know their ways, Beppe. He writes to me, that he *must* have some money—a good round sum. He leaves it to me—to us, that is—to find the best mode of raising it."

"A task, my good Carlo, that becomes simplified in proportion to the smallness of choice in the matter."

"You may say that, *per Bacco!* When the lands are all gone, one comes to the house. 'Tis the natural order of things."

"It is, indeed, I fear, the natural order of things with our spendthrift nobles," said the jeweller, with uplifted hands and eyes; "what times! what times we live in! What would the old fathers of the Republic have said to such lives as their descendants live? In truth there seems nothing for it but the Palazzo."

"It must come to that sure enough;" replied the other. "But for this time there is one other resource I thought of, which ought to be cleared out of the way, as I may say, before coming to the Palazzo."

"Cleared out of the way, Carlo! what a strange fellow you are! Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the citizen brother, quietly, and this time with his mouth, and *not* with his eyes. "And what is this resource, may I ask?"

"Why, there are the diamonds, the Scopa family jewels, you know, which the late Marchese bought at

Rome, when the old Cardinal died. They must be worth the price of a *podere* * or two."

"Ay, the diamonds! Yes, brother Carlo, they are worth the price of a *podere* or two, and not very small ones either. But . . . . they *are* fine stones; would you like to see them? They are in my strong box in the wall there."

"You don't mean it!" cried the Fattore, his broad face flushing into purple with anger. "So then my noble padrone thought to steal a march upon me, did he?"

"Not a bit of it! Don't put yourself in danger of an apoplectic stroke for nothing, brother Carlo. The Marchese thinks that the jewels are safe in Casa Lunardi at this moment. But the Marchesa came here one night in such a state that she really discomposed me by the excess of her agitation. She had the diamonds with her! What could I do? A woman of that class in distress is more than I can bear to see. I gave her the full worth of the jewels,—the full worth. But they *are* superb stones."

"So the Marchesa has put her hand to the work, has she? Well, if there are two tapping one barrel, one driving his spigot in at each end, it can't be long in coming to the lees! It seems we have come to the house, then?"

"'Twould seem so, indeed."

"And about the house? It is a fine property. I should say that the Palazzo Lunardi was a good purchase at twenty thousand dollars, brother Beppe."

"More, brother! more. The Virgin forbid that I should ever depreciate the value of a mortgageable

* Tuscan for "farm." The Tuscan "poderi" are for the most part small.

property. The estimated value, for purpose of mortgage, of the Palazzo Lunardi is twenty-two thousand six hundred scudi. One becomes acquainted with little facts of this sort in my line of business. The valuation for purpose of mortgage, you understand; that is, due deduction made for possible depreciation of property, for four years' interest, as by law allowed, for possible legal expenses in the process of foreclosure, etc.—Twenty-two thousand six hundred scudi. But you are aware, I presume, brother Carlo, that the interest accruing on former loans is secured on the Palazzo; for the sums contracted for were paid over in full, no deduction made from the principal on account of interest. I never do that sort of thing. It does not suit me. I prefer proper and separate security for the interest. The sum therefore which could still be advanced on the Palazzo is very much smaller than that I named."

"Well, there is no good in our wearing our lungs out to talk of what we know the end of. What can we advance on the house, with justice to ourselves and to the Marchese? I must go to him *al tocco*,* to tell him the upshot of the matter."

"In one word, then, brother Carlo,—though truly your country-mannered abruptness almost takes one's breath away; in one word, I should be ready to advance on the Palazzo Lunardi and its dependencies as much as twelve thousand scudi; twelve thousand scudi, but not one soldo beyond."

"Very good, brother; and now I will go to the Marchese. To tell you the truth, I think you are

* The Tuscan phrase for one o'clock; it is not known in other parts of Italy. *Tocco* is "touch;" *i. e.*, one touch of the bell.

going almost beyond what is prudent. But you know best."

"Good bye, *Carlo mio!* We shall see each other by-and-bye in the Borgo de' Greci. I *have* named an outside sum; but I always strive to deal liberally by an old client. Addio!"

"Yes!" the money-lender muttered to himself, as his brother squeezed himself through the little door and closed it behind him; "yes! a very pretty thing to leave it so that he could find the means of raising another miserable thousand crowns or so upon the house, and so letting a stranger into the affair! Oh, brother Carlo! brother Carlo! If ever a man *had* a pumpkin in place of a head . . . ."

And the General of the Jesuits in mufti put his gold eye-glasses on the high bridge of his long nose, and sat down before a huge ledger.

CHAPTER III.

THE PALAZZO LUNARDI.

THE Palazzo Lunardi was one of those fine old historical mansions which the Florentines will not permit to change their names, let the ancient family from which the name came have been ever so long extinct or forgotten, and the building have passed through ever so many changes of modern owners. In vain the new possessors of it, the Marchesi Perini, father and son, had done everything in their power to make the new name supplant the old one, and cause their own house to be called by their own name, instead of by that of the long-since ousted former proprietors. It was a hard case. Palazzo Perini it was, as far as law, and legal registry, and the payment of hard cash, could make it. And yet nobody in all Florence, but the new masters, called it anything save the Palazzo Lunardi. Every shopkeeper, every hack-carriage driver, every street-bred *gamin,* knew the Palazzo Lunardi; but all utterly ignored the Palazzo Perini.

And now, before the second generation of the new name had passed away, it seemed likely to turn out that the Florentines had done well not to adopt it; for, as we have seen, the time appeared not to be far

off when the old mansion would have to change owners yet again.

It was a noble old house, rearing its dark grey stone front high in air above the more modern buildings that surrounded it, in an out-of-the-way nook in that ancient part of the city between the back of the Palazzo della Signoria and the Convent of San Firenze. There is no part of Florence, with the exception of the recently-built quarters of the city, in which such old historic mansions with old historic names may not be found, often embedded in and, were it not for their towering height, concealed by the constructions of later generations agglomerated around them. It was not a situation which a new man, with new riches, new ideas, and a new-minded wife, would have selected for a residence. And the Marchesa Perini often sighed for a more modern, yellow-faced, square-windowed palace in the Via Larga. But the thrifty, money-getting father of the present spendthrift Marchese had bought the grand old palace for a sum that would never have sufficed to put the roof on it; and after all, when you were once inside it, and had mounted the long and somewhat steep stairs that brought you to the "*piano nobile*," or first floor, there was no mistake about its being "*nobile*" indeed; and the rooms were such as few, if any, of the coveted more modish mansions possessed. So the huge Perini porter, in the gorgeous Perini livery, invented by a tailor of rainbow-eclipsing taste, continued stationary in the repainted and bedizened doorway; the quiet narrow old streets in the vicinity echoed at all hours of the night to the roll of carriages, and on every Saturday night the old grey face of the *palazzo*

blushed from end to end of its wide extent with the flare of lights, and the whole neighbourhood was crowded with the equipages of the fast-going portion of the Florentine aristocracy, thronging to the Marchesa Perini's weekly receptions, at which neither the splendidly-illuminated ball-room, nor even the half-lighted, queer-shaped little nooks found only in houses of similar antiquity, and serving in this nineteenth century most admirably for the reception of a little sofa just large enough for two, and no other article of furniture beside, were the most exciting or most eagerly sought attractions. And the gaffers and gammers of the quarter, as they gossiped Tuscan-wise on their doorsteps, took a malicious pleasure in predicting that the Lunardi would before very long be avenged on those who had dispossessed them, by seeing the new dynasty more ignominiously deposed, after a very much shorter reign.

As for the old possessors, the Lunardi themselves, there had never existed a male or female of the race who would have changed the old house which bore their name, for any other that human hands had ever built, or who would have consented to have it removed bodily, had it been possible, to any other situation. For was there not the Loggia de' Lunardi in the immediate neighbourhood—long since built up and turned to other uses, it is true; but still the name remained, as indefeasibly its own in the mind and on the tongue of every Florentine born beneath the shadow of the Campanile, as if its once beautiful arches were still open, and long-robed and hooded nobles of the "*consorteria** *dei Lunardi*" were still

* The various branches of the great Tuscan families, and those closely allied with them, were thus collectively called.

wont to assemble there for pleasant discourse, or in family council? Was not the spot still called the *Canto* dei Lunardi*, and known to the whole city by no other name? Did not the venerable old walls still bear the scars of more than one stout encounter with civil broil, when the Lunardi had held their own against the raging efforts of the insurgent populace? Were there not still at either corner of the huge sombre front of the pile, high in air above the adjacent houses, the two massive stone escutcheons, with the dear old canting device—a crescent moon, with flames rising from the point of either horn? Yes! there they were still, eyesore as they were to the new owner; for buy the house as he might, he could not buy, nor could the former owner, even had he wished it, sell the right to remove those time-honoured historical memorials. Scientific jurists may think of such jurisprudence what they please, but the historian and the lover of antiquity will appreciate the old Tuscan rule, which forbids the destruction of all such relics of the past. The Marchese Perini might take down the old house, and build a new one from its foundations. Alas! yes he might do that; for it was his. But those old indestructible arms, those landmarks in Florentine history, the foot-prints, as it were, of those who were lords of the soil before him, must—will he, nill he—reappear on the new face of his new house.

To any one who had a spark of the sentiment of historical association and veneration, it would not have appeared strange that the old Lunardi should have held with tenacious affection to their hereditary home, and have felt, when the dreadful hour came in

* *Canto*—corner.

which they were compelled to dispossess themselves of it, as if the last drops of their long-descended blood had been wrung out of their hearts. It was one of those strikingly characteristic piles of building which impart to the Tuscan cities the special style and character peculiar to them, and which are, to those acquainted with the annals of the country, typical of the entire course of its social and political history.

The walls, as high as the spring of the massive vaulting which supported the first floor, were built of huge masses of rough-hewn stone, in the manner known to builders as "rustic," though its earliest use is especially characteristic of *civic* architecture. The upper part of the walls above this was of ashlar stone, in regular courses, black with the passage over them of the weather of centuries. The building consisted of the "*terreno*," or ground floor, with huge vaulted cellars beneath its whole extent; "*piano nobile*," or first floor, containing almost all the portion of the house personally occupied by the masters of it; a "*secondo piano*," or second floor, containing rooms almost as fine as those on the *piano nobile*, and often used in Tuscan families, living after the patriarchal fashion of the old noblesse, for the accommodation of a married son, a dowager mother, a younger brother, or other such-like portions of the family; and above this an open *loggia*, consisting of a huge roof, projecting far over the street on naked beams, with grotesquely carved extremities, and supported on stone pillars in front, and at the rear by a third storey, containing a whole nest of smaller rooms, some of which were rendered pleasant by opening on the *loggia* in front of them.

The frontage of the palace had five enormous

round arched windows on the first floor, and on the *terreno* four such, and a similarly arched door in the place of the centre one. It was a door reached by five steps from the pavement, and not a carriage entrance, such as those of the palaces of a later generation. For the Palazzo Lunardi was built before carriages were dreamed of in Florence ; and the litter of the noble mistress of the house could be quite well carried up the steps on the shoulders of its bearers, and deposited for my lady to alight in the huge gloomy hall at the foot of the large but steep and sombre staircase. On either side of this doorway the two enormous windows were defended by iron gratings of immense weight and strength, which exceedingly increased the prison-like and frowning gloom of the physiognomy of the house. On the floor above, the ancient, small-paned, heavy-beamed windows had been removed by the present owner, and replaced by light modern casements ; and the stern aspect of the frontage further mitigated by the addition of bright green " persiane," or sun shutters, to all the windows.

At the back of the house there was a small but very pleasant garden, enclosed by a *loggia* running round three sides of it, that on the side of the house forming, in fact, a part of the *terreno,* and the two others being at right angles to it. The garden therefore was no wider than the house, and was nearly square, the bottom being shut in by the high side wall of a neighbouring church, founded by the Lunardi, and containing the bones of many generations of the family.

This little garden, it will be seen, was very small, so much so as hardly to deserve the name. But it

contained some half a score of treasures, the price of which would, in these days, have more than equalled that paid by the elder Perini for the house. Built into the wall of the church, at the bottom of the little space, was a magnificent circular piece of the workmanship of Luca della Robbia,—the portrait of Rodolpo de' Lunardi, Gonfaloniere of Florence, surrounded with a garland of flowers, fruits and foliage of inimitable truthfulness, and in perfect preservation. Under one of the lateral *loggie* were two subjects in basso-rilievo, by the hand of Donatello, one representing Astancollo de' Lunardi presenting the model of the church founded by him to the Virgin ; and the other embodying a still earlier family legend, which told how Lunardo Lunardi beat off the attack of three gigantic Saracens in the Holy Land. The opposite *loggia* was adorned by a very grand representation of the Annunciation, in *terra cotta*, by Orgagna, and by two portrait busts by Niccolo Pisano, representing the gaunt and elongated figures of some contemporary male and female Lunardi. Beneath that *loggia* which formed a portion of the house itself there were two full-sized statues between the windows ; one by Desidero da Settignano, of a Lunardi who was a General of the forces of the Republic ; and the other by Benedetto da Marano, representing another of the race in his robes as a Cardinal.

But all these treasures had not been counted at the value of old stones even in the estimate of the price paid for the house ; nor indeed, had they been removed for the purpose of turning them into money separately, would they at that day have paid for the expense of moving and selling them.

It has been said that the gossips of the quarter in which the Palazzo Lunardi was situated speculated with the malicious satisfaction of people, whose sympathies were all with the former owners, on the probability that the property would ere long pass away from those who had succeeded them. And it has been seen how likely it was that their feelings on the subject would be gratified. If the blind goddess should but continue a little longer to avert her smiles from the Marchese, it was clear that about a quarter of a century would see the commencement and the close of the Perini dynasty. For it was not more than twenty-five years before the date of the conversation between the brothers Palli on the Ponte Vecchio, that the father of the present Marchese had bought the house of the impoverished Conte dei Lunardi.

Twenty-five years ago the long dreaded and at last inevitable hour had arrived, when absolute necessity had compelled the Conte Rinaldo de' Lunardi, then an old man in his seventieth year, to sell the family palace, the last remaining fraction of the once ample property of his family. The ruin of the Lunardi had not been, like that of their successors in the property, a rapid process consummated in a few years. No reckless profligacy of living had occasioned it. Like many another ancient Tuscan family, they had been undergoing a slow but ever progressing process of ruin for many generations. For several generations the noble Lunardi had been exclusively consuming, and in no degree producing, members of society. The social system in which they lived had "no career" for such as they. Fathers, sons, brothers, uncles, cousins, had to be kept alive, in some sort

after the fashion of gentlemen, out of the proceeds of the family property. And the Lunardi had always been much too true to the traditions and habits of their caste either to be capable of looking after and managing their estates, or to be careful and exacting masters of those who did so for them. They sighed, grumbled, but let themselves be robbed; and retrenched their expenses year after year, not dreaming that any other possibility was open to them than to eat, in perfectly aristocratic idleness, such bread as was put into their mouths for them. So the Lunardi's "*Fattori*" grew richer, and the masters grew poorer generation after generation; and the land was sold acre after acre, till nothing remained but the old palace. And then gradually debts accumulated, and money was raised upon the family mansion; and so the inevitable end came slowly but surely on.

The Marchese Rinaldo was an old man of seventy, when at last the bottom of the long hill was reached, and he had to relinquish the last bit of the possessions of his ancestors. To an English family of ancient name, the necessity of parting with their London mansion would be by no means the bitterest drop in the cup of ruin. The parting from the long-owned provincial acres, and the old country home with its ancestral trees,—this would be the sharpest pang to the descendant of one of William the Norman's followers. But to a Florentine of ancient name all this is different. The ancient glories of his race have been all civic glories; their wealth probably civic wealth; the old city residence is the emblem and embodiment of his greatness to the eyes of his countrymen, and the palladium of the family

fortunes. And when this is gone, the family is sunken indeed, and the glory has departed from it.

And, unhappily, the old Cônte Rinaldo had been a man especially calculated to feel the blow which had fallen on him with exceeding bitterness. Though quite as incapable of doing any good thing to arrest the decline of his family as any of his brother nobles, though wholly ignorant of any knowledge available for any such purpose, he was not, as almost all his fellows were, either a vicious, or a totally idle, or an entirely uninformed man. He had been all his life a sedulous student and lover of the history and antiquities of his native city. Probably no man of his day had so intimate and accurate an acquaintance with the family histories and genealogies, and alliances of the noble Florentine families, as himself. As for the annals and story of his own family, and the old family parchments and records upon which they were founded, his knowledge of them was the result of worship rather than of mere study. No wealth would have tempted him to change his family name and history for those of any one of the names ennobled in times subsequent to the Medicean supremacy. Really gentle blood, he would say, can assign no date to the period of its becoming such. The record of a time when a name was not noble, is an indelible blot on an escutcheon. History knew nothing of any time when the Lunardi were not noble.

It will be readily imagined that, to a man of this class of mind, whose intellect and imagination had been fed during a lifetime on such studies and thoughts, the final downfall of his family was dreadful. In fact, he never recovered from the blow. The decree, which pronounced that his place should know

him no more, that the bit of Florence which had been Lunardi ever since the city was a city, should no longer belong to him or his, was more dreadful than a sentence to a thousand deaths. He lingered, a stricken and very miserable man, for five years after the sale of his ancestral home, and died broken-hearted just about twenty years before the date of the events related in the last chapter.

The Conte Rinaldo had been left a widower early in life, with one only daughter; and it had been for several years a matter of deep regret to him, that his one child was not a son. But as the years went on, he saw cause to be more than acquiescent in the decree which had given him, as the sole companion of his mature life and the prop of his age, his little Marietta. For, indeed, the continuance of the Lunardo line and blood in the male branch did not entirely depend on the issue of his own loins. Had that indeed been the case, no amount of comfort and happiness which he might have found in his daughter's sympathy and love, no tenderness that the close companionship of the father and daughter might have given rise to in his heart, would have been any compensation to him for failure in that one paramount object. Happily it was not so.

The Conte Rinaldo had been the eldest of three brothers. The second was the Canon Giacomo de' Lunardi, of whom more will be heard in the following pages. The third had held some small office under the Grand Ducal Government, on the slender salary of which he had married, when the death of his elder brother's wife, leaving only one female child, rendered that step necessary for securing the over-riding object of providing a male heir to the name

and title—and nothing else—of the Lunardi race. Happily both he and his wife had died very soon after having accomplished the object for the sake of which he had dared to face aristocratic starvation with a patrician partner in the desperate enterprise. The son thus left an orphan was, as a matter of course, received into the house and family of the Conte Rinaldo, who felt strongly that his brother had done his duty in life nobly, and who set himself to educate his nephew in all the articles of the true Lunardi faith, and especially to place before him the paramount duty of treading in his noble father's steps, and assuring by an early marriage the continuance of the race descended in unfailing right line from Lunardo Lunardi the Crusader.

Duly impressed with this view of the object of his creation, and with a clear perception of his path of duty in the world, the conscientious young man married early in life; and having Phœnix-like transmitted to an heir the sacred deposit of nobility entrusted to him, he too died, as his young wife had done in giving birth to the precious Phœnix, in whom the hopes of the house of Lunardi were henceforward concentrated. The great nephew thus born to the Conte Rinaldo, first saw the light in the *Secondo Piano* of the old ancestral palace; and of course continued to make part—the most important part of all—of his great uncle's family, where he remained, as his father had remained before him, an orphan child. The little Sebastian,—that was the name selected for him, as being one of those most frequently recurring in the family tree—was as fine and likely a child as could be wished for the hopes of a noble house to rest on. Indeed, his father had not died so prematurely from any

defect of constitution. His life had been of a kind which any calculator of the chances and risks of mortality would have deemed as safe from casualties as any existence could well be. He rarely stirred beyond the city walls, unless for a lounge in the neighbouring *cascine*; never mounted a horse; never quarrelled with any man; and the only danger which could within the limits of possibility threaten him, seemed to be that, common to all "land-lubbers on shore," of a roof tile falling on his head. Yet fate found him out, and picked him off by an accident singular enough. One of the huge heavy-framed portraits in the great central hall of the palace, suddenly fell from its place, high on the wall, and killed him on the spot, as he stood engaged in his favourite occupation of gazing at the features of the bygone generations of his ancestors.

The Conte Rinaldo was much disquieted by the circumstance, deeming it a portent of evil augury to the house of Lunardi, until a friend of the family, with whom the reader will make acquaintance by-and-by, gave a different reading to the omen, by pointing out that the original of the picture which had thus fallen from its high place in the Lunardi galaxy, had been one who had blemished the fair escutcheon of the family by a smirch of heresy, in the troublous times when the pestilent doctrines of the Reformation had been prevalent in Italy.

But there were portents in the Lunardi sky about that time of a very much more significant kind, which did not admit of being explained away in any such ingenious manner. The old family lawyer shook his head very gravely, when consulted on the possibility of raising a further small sum on the security of the

palace. Brother Giacomo, the Canon, good easy man, was willing to let any portion of his ecclesiastical revenues, which his brother chose to take, go towards the maintainance of the family. But all that this source could supply was a sufficiency to keep the daily wolf from appearing absolutely at the door, and no relief could be hoped from it towards alleviating the pressure of debt. In short, the eve of the fatal day, long foreseen, yet never looked in the face, had arrived; and it became clear that the birth of the young heir, and the death of his father so rapidly following it, were the last events which the old Conte, who with reverential care carried on the family chronicle from year to year, would have to relate as having taken place on the scene of all the previous record.

These were sad circumstances enough for the heir to all the Lunardi honours to be born under. Yet this birth and the promising appearance of the child was a great comfort and consolation to the Marchese amid his sorrows. That the sun of the old Lunardi glory should have set—that a dark night-season of obscurity was at hand—though to be followed some day, as he trusted, by a glorious returning dawn—this was sad and painful. But that the race should have become extinct—that all should be over, and the name of Lunardi no more be a familiar sound in Florence—that would indeed have been like the end of the world and crack of universal doom. It was all the difference between death with a firm belief in an immortal life beyond the grave, and the blank horror of annihilation.

So the little Sebastian was cherished as fondly, and watched over as anxiously by the old Conte his

great uncle, and by his cousin Marietta, after their expulsion from the Eden of Palazzo Lunardi, as he could have been had the family honours to which he was heir been in their palmiest state. But the old Conte survived the shock of his misfortune only some five years. He had been a hale and vigorous old man previously to the blow; he became a withered and shrivelled pantaloon after it.

This sad and cheerless period of five years between the deposition and the death of the Conte Rinaldo, which brought him from sixty-five to seventy, his daughter Marietta from thirteen to eighteen, and his great nephew Sebastian from one to six, years of their respective ages, was passed by the little family in a small and cheap lodging, not far from the Palazzo, in the house of one Simone Boccanera, then a young working jeweller, in the employment of Giuseppe Palli, the well-known goldsmith on the Ponte Vecchio. And their place of retreat was singularly well chosen in one respect. For Boccanera, —who was in many respects a queer man, with queer tastes for one of his class, and much queer, out of the way information,—was himself as he declared, probably with perfect truth, the lineal male descendant of a family once powerful and famous in the days of the old Republic. Though the decline of *his* family, from near the apex to very near the base of the social pyramid, had occurred so long ago as to have been generations since accepted by them as an accomplished fact, neither to be reversed or sorrowed over, yet a handsomely painted wooden escutcheon, emblazoned with the Boccanera arms, occupied a large portion of the wall of his work-room; and he was much addicted to the same sort of studies and

researches which had made the business of the Count's life. Thus it came to pass that the stricken and ruined patrician was treated with a degree of respect, deference, and appreciating sympathy which contributed much to alleviate the sorrows of his last years. This community of tastes and feelings between the old noble and the young artizan, and the soothing tribute of respect rendered on the score of that quality on which his own self-estimation was based, led to a kind of companionship between the jeweller and his lodger, which in truth was of no small comfort to the latter.

And there were long conversations between that oddly contrasted couple of men, in the little meanly furnished room, with the jeweller's working bench on one side of the window and the old Count's easy chair on the other; while Marietta, then rapidly growing into beauty of a very high order, sat by and listened with her great earnest eyes flashing out triumph or indignation, as the old-world histories flattered or offended her Lunardi-taught ideas of right and wrong; conversations that might have been worth recording, were time and space elastic. Specially they were so when the little party, as frequently happened, was increased by the presence of a very handsome youngster, then about eighteen years old —the same who, lad as he was, so ingeniously expounded the omen of the fallen picture to the Count's relief—one Guido Guidi, the son of an old friend of the Lunardi family. The young man was wont to join in the conversation of the old noble and the jeweller, very evidently at no disadvantage. His knowledge of the history of his country, if less intimate with detail than that of the Conte Rinaldo,

was of a far larger and more vigorous grasp. His sympathies and theories were, or seemed to be, all in accordance with theirs; and he too came of a very noble race. But there was a tone of shrewd appreciation of the real value of names and men, a practical, bold view of things,—like his who deemed the world his oyster to be opened by his own sword, or wit,—and a hard, sarcastic, and at times almost cynical estimation of the nature and worth of the aims of men, and of the obstacles in their way, in the conversation of this young man, which contrasted curiously with the somewhat feeble acceptance of the world, as it was made for them, which characterised the ideas of the other two.

The handsome youngster talked well. And Marietta, as she sat and listened, rewarding each bold, self-relying sentiment with a flash of her large dark eye, a flush of her fair young cheek, and an approving smile on the curve of her proud lip, received, as a rich and congenial soil receives the seed, the new views and ideas which were generated in her mind by the action of a strong intellect and energetic will on the subjects of her life-long meditations, and the objects of her life-long idolatry. That such smiles were the guerdon for the sake of which the young man spoke, and that the attraction which brought him to the humble lodgings of the working jeweller was not entirely the hope of comforting the declining years of his father's old friend in those days of his adversity, need hardly be told.

And after five years of the pale life, the chief events and excitements of which have been thus cursorily indicated, the old Count died, and was, as literally as he could have wished, gathered to his

fathers, in the vaults of the little church of Sant' Anselmo dei Lunardi, at the back of the palace.

And this death took place, as nearly as may be, twenty years before the date of the incidents narrated in the preceding chapters; the surviving members of the Lunardi family being then, the deceased Count's younger brother, the Canon Giacomo de Lunardi; his daughter, Marietta, then in her eighteenth year; and his great-nephew, Sebastian, who had just completed his sixth.

CHAPTER IV.

ON THE THIRD FLOOR OF PALAZZO LUNARDI.

ON that May morning, just about twenty years after the death of the Conte Rinaldo, and about five-and-twenty after the sale of the Lunardi Palace to the Perini, on which, as has been narrated, stout farmer Palli and his handsome son came up to Florence on business likely to cause the old palazzo to change hands once again ere long, the Fattore, on leaving his brother Giuseppe in his shop on the bridge, after their confidential business talk, went directly to the palace to communicate as much of the result of that conversation as was necessary to the Marchese.

The nature of the talk he had just had with his brother made it natural that the Fattore should look about him, as he entered the palace, with a more scrutinizing eye than he might otherwise have done. And his observation led him to modify the opinion he had expressed of the imprudent liberality of his brother's estimate of the value of the property. It was very clear to a less shrewd observer than the Fattore, that whoever might become the purchaser of the palazzo now would have a very different sort of bargain from that which the Perini had when they bought it, a quarter of a century ago. Then it had

been in a state of dilapidation, the result of the neglect of many years, caused by the ever-increasing impoverishment of the old family. Now everything was in perfect repair and excellent order. The late Marchese Perini had spent a very considerable sum of money on the building; and now, despite the pecuniary position of the present owner, there was every outward appearance of wealth and abundant means.

For the ruin of such men as Perini is altogether a different rort of process from the ruin of such people as the Lunardi. There is all the difference between the two catastrophes that there is between death by apoplexy and death by starvation. And the body in the former case, as figured by the bankrupt man's belongings, has all the appearance of robust and florid health.

Thus everything was in a high state of preservation in the Palazzo Lunardi. The big porter at the door was as gorgeous as ever ; the black and white squares of marble on the floor of the entrance-hall, which under the present dynasty had replaced the old bricks worn by the feet of citizens of the Republic, were as clean and smart as hands could make them ; the recently-painted staircase was ornamented by a handsome stair-carpet, the first it had ever known in the long course of its existence ; the front door was fastened by modern and smooth-going locks and brazen bolts, instead of the old-fashioned iron hold-fasts extending diagonally from the door jambs to huge hooks in the doors, which had served the former owner and his ancestors ; the foot of the staircase was closed by a smart and costly glass screen and doors, instead of opening directly on the huge entrance-

hall; the antechamber at the head of the stairs was furnished with handsome settles of carved walnut-wood, and with a tall footman yawning on one of them; and the noble master of the mansion was, though it was past one o'clock, still in bed, as farmer Palli was informed by the latter piece of furniture.

So the Fattore had to wait for his interview with *il padrone,* as he called him in speaking to the footman; which he did very contentedly. A Tuscan never objects to waiting for any length of time, especially if there is any possibility of spending it in chat. He is thus authorised and justified in delaying to proceed to whatever business he may have on hand; and that is always a benefit to be thankful for. Carlo Palli therefore sat down very contentedly to gossip with the servant till the Marchese should be ready to receive him. But as "we others" are apt not to be equally patient, and as it is hardly necessary for us to be present at the interview between the ruined gambler and his man of business, seeing that we know already pretty well what had to pass between them, and the upshot of it, we will take the opportunity of making our way up two more flights of stairs in the palazzo, and looking in at the third floor.

This third floor occupied, as has been mentioned in describing the palace, only that part of the building which fronted the garden, the rest of the space on that floor being taken up by an open *loggia* after the old Florentine fashion. This *loggia* faced the east, and from its altitude above three suites of rooms, each lofty enough to make at least two floors in a modern Parisian house, commanded a magnificent view of the Vallombrosa and Chianti hills. It was

thus either on summer evenings or on winter mornings a very pleasant place, and went far to repay the inhabitants of that third floor for the length of stair they had to climb to reach it.

This third floor was divided into two apartments, both possessing some rooms opening on to the *loggia*, which thus had to be enjoyed in common between them, and both let to different humble tenants. It was no special measure of thrift in the Marchese thus to make something of part of his noble residence. He was childless; the two lower floors and ground floor were far more than he and his Marchesa could occupy; and under these circumstances it was quite a matter of course in Florence for the *maestro di casa* to let the rooms above.

Having climbed the long stair, the last flight of which, leading from the level of the second floor to that of the third, was yet steeper than the lower portions, but still of solid stone to the top, we find two stout but modest-looking doors, on one of which is a neat brass plate, bearing the inscription, in cursive letters, "IL CANONICO GIACOMO DE' LUNARDI."

Pulling the worn and faded tassel of a little bell-pull at this door, a tinkle is heard on the other side of the plank, and the door is presently opened by a lad some fourteen years old, somewhat incongruously clad in a striped blue linen jacket, no waistcoat, shiny black camlet breeches buckled at the knee, very coarse black worsted stockings, and thick low-cut buckled shoes; evidently a seminarist, chorister, altar-server, or suckling of the church of some sort.

The small and all but entirely dark entry on which the outer door of the apartment opened, gave access to

two or three other doors, barely distinguishable by the feeble gleam which struggled in through a borrowed light, opening on the great staircase. One of these doors, however, on being opened, admitted a flood of pleasant sunlight, for it gave entrance to a good-sized and cheerful room, lit by two large windows opening down to the ground on to the pleasant sunny terrace, or *loggia*, which has been described.

There were two persons in the room ; but passing them by for the moment, we will step out through the open window on to the terrace, both because the magnificent view and genial sunlight on that May morning naturally invited any one entering the apartment to do so, and because it is proper, in the first place, to make acquaintance with the master of the dwelling.

There, basking in the sunshine in a huge easy chair, with a little table by his side, and complacently watching the shadows as they chased each other over the forest-clothed Vallombrosan mountains in the far distance, sat the Canonico Giacomo de' Lunardi, a hale and healthy-looking old man of eighty-five. On the little table by his side lay a violin with its bow, and some sheets of MS. music. Like his ecclesiastical serving-lad the Canon had, both for economy and comfort sake, discarded the straight-cut single-breasted black cloth canon's coat, as soon as he had returned from his morning mass, and replaced it by a loose short jacket of rather coarse blue cloth, which contrasted somewhat strangely with the remainder of his correct ecclesiastical attire. His huge, three-cornered hat, carefully brushed, might be seen hanging on its appointed peg in the sitting-room ; but he wore the clerical black skull cap, from beneath

which his abundant white locks flowed down on either side. His brother, the Conte Rinaldo, had been a tall spare man, so much so as to have become almost gaunt in his later years. But Canon Giacomo was of a more happy and thriving temperament, and had in his old age grown to a comfortable roundness of cheek, of stomach, and of calf. Neither was he, in expression of face and in feature, a genuine Lunardi. There was neither the dark eye, nor the high-ridged nose, nor the long sallow cheek. It was a still bright and clear, though mild, blue eye, that wandered pleasedly over the landscape, as he sat with his head a little on one side, a half smile on his good-humoured and somewhat thick lips, and his hands folded on the commencement of the protuberance of his waistcoat.

A more pleasing presentment of advanced old age than that offered by the figure of the old Canon, as he sate in the profound peacefulness of that sunny terrace, far out of reach of the street noises of the city below, it would be difficult to imagine.

" Of what is the old man thinking?" as he gazes over the distant hills. Probably, that it is getting near dinner time, and that he has some hopes,—of a mild kind, quite prepared for resignation in case of disappointment,—that Marietta is going to give him a salad with that pigeon which he spied being taken into the little cupboard of a kitchen, as he entered the house on returning from his mass.

The whole style and appearance of the apartment and its contents spoke very clearly of narrowly restricted means and careful, saving economy. But the poverty was not sordid poverty. Everything about the person of the Canon and his dwelling was

clean and neat, and orderly, giving unmistakeable evidence of the presence of female care, and that of a woman good at the womanly duties of a housewife.

In the hill villages, among the chestnut woods of the Tuscan Apennines, more than one little isolated community may be found, where people will tell you that it is noon when *il Signor Curato* is hungry, the very tolerably regular movement of his reverence's digestion affording the most ready and trustworthy means at hand of calculating the march of time. But in Florence, where church clocks abound, the old Canon could not make it dinner-time when he pleased, and had to wait till the appointed hour arrived.

Meanwhile the reader may make acquaintance with the two persons who were in the sitting room that he passed through to reach the *loggia*.

They were a man and a woman, nearly about the same age, and both were still strikingly handsome. Marietta, for she it was, was now eight-and-thirty, and the Reverend Canonico Guido Guidi, a member of the Chapter of San Lorenzo, was, as the attentive reader already knows, some three years older.

Twenty years ago we caught a passing glimpse of these two, then lad and lass, in the spring-tide of their lives, under circumstances which seemed to indicate that a love attachment was likely to form itself between them, if it had not already been implanted in either heart. But if love there had been between them, it was very evident that its course had not run smooth; for here was the gentleman, very unmistakeably vowed to the celibacy of the priesthood; and there was that undefinable and

inexplicable something about Marietta which stamps a spinster in advanced life. In fact, Marietta was still Marietta de' Lunardi, that rare phenomenon in the social life of Italy, an old maid ; still rarer, when it is added, one who had possessed extreme loveliness, and was yet, at the ripe age of eight-and-thirty, a very beautiful woman.

The Canonico Guido Guidi, for his part, was, perhaps, now a more strikingly handsome man, than he had been a good-looking lad twenty years ago. Yet those women, whose love springs out of their moral, as much as out of their physical nature, would have instinctively been less likely to think him loveable now, than had they seen him as he was then. The means by which one moral nature speaks silently, instantly, uncontradictably to another are very subtle, and often escape all our means of analysing or accounting for them. There were, no doubt, good grounds, though it was so impossible to state them, for the antipathy felt to that Dr. Fell, consigned to so unenviable a proverbial immortality. And it might have been equally difficult to give "the reason why" many a man and woman would have felt repelled, instead of attracted, by the fine classic features and really noble presence of the Canon Guidi. His finely proportioned and manly figure, which spoke decision and energetic will in every movement, attitude, and outline, was set off by every advantage of costume compatible with the exigencies of his profession. But there was no symptom in it of that desire to sink the priest, as far as possible, and to suppress to the utmost permissible degree the distinctive peculiarities of ecclesiastical attire, which may be observed in certain of the Roman Catholic clergy, who would

fain run their race against gay and gallant lay rivals at a less disadvantage in the matter of outward presentment. Canon Guidi dressed, and stepped, and looked, and bore himself every inch a dignified priest of his church. But every portion of his attire was of the finest quality and in the nicest condition, perfectly well fitting, and worn with grace; and as he stood upright and well planted as a guardsman, but with less of stiffness, and more of dignity and ease, many a wearer of the all-concealing trouser and boot might have envied the ecclesiastical privilege of displaying such a leg, ankle, and foot, in a well-drawn silk stocking and elegantly-shaped pump, with its gilded silver buckle.

Marietta, as has been said, was still beautiful; nay, there are many men who would have said that she was more beautiful now in her womanhood than she had been when the bloom of girlhood was on her cheek. Nor was there, in her case, anything in the inner nature hid beneath the attractive surface, which warned the beholder of dangerous and unlovely qualities by that mysterious action of sympathies and antipathies, which has been adverted to in speaking of her companion. In Marietta there was nothing repellent to moral sympathy, unless, indeed, a certain expression of strength of will and force of resolution, visible in the well-cut modelling of the firm and well-developed chin, might be considered as such. Yet there was nothing more of this than what is admired in men. But it detracted somewhat from the softness of character which we are apt to require that women should possess, while we quarrel with many of the necessary accompaniments and results of it. Yet, though the entire bearing, port, and

figure of Marietta de' Lunardi was that of a Juno rather than of a Venus, the expression of the features taken in its entirety was not deficient in sweetness or gentleness. Notwithstanding that expression, which has been noticed, and which would have led a physiognomist to expect a character endowed with firmness, approaching obstinacy, and an unconquerable tenacity of purpose, there was yet often on the beautifully-curved lips of the large and admirably-modelled mouth a somewhat sad smile that had much of tenderness in it. And though the large dark eye could still at times flash out the eloquence of unschooled passion from beneath the strongly-marked black eyebrow, which contrasted with the marble whiteness of the pure and lofty forehead; while in its more wonted mood it wore the expression of that concentration and self-absorption which indicates the domination of a fixed idea, and the habitual presence to the mind of some one master passion and overruling object; yet when her thought was brought back to dwell on those near and dear to her, there was often a look that told of a nature which might have thrown all the vigour of its vital powers into blossoming forth in love, had not the force of circumstances combined, with certain other qualities of the idiosyncrasy, to divert the life-sap of the rich and strong organisation to other objects and passions of a different order.

She was somewhat above the ordinary stature of women, slender in figure, with long, elegantly-formed feet and hands, but with a well-developed width of shoulder and fulness of bust;—a magnificently organised specimen of Nature's handiwork, and none the less calculated to make a deep impression on any man who looked on her, that her cheek was marble-

white, her abundant black hair flecked here and there with grey, and her habitual manner subdued and tinged with a hue of serious sadness.

Considering the circumstances under which Marietta and Guidi have been represented as meeting in their young days, many years ago, and those under which they are now again found together, as also the somewhat indifferent character attributed in such matters to Rome's bachelor priesthood, it may be as well to prevent the possibility of any misapprehension by stating simply that there neither was, nor had at any time ever been anything in their relationship to each other inconsistent with the strictest propriety. That they were on terms of intimacy, however, was evident from the nature of their *tête-à-tête* conversation. The window between the room in which they were, and the *loggia* under which the old canon was sitting, was open indeed; but the easy-chair was placed back away from the window, in the sunniest corner of the *loggia;* and there was no possibility that conversation in the room should be overheard.

"And how stands the account, Signora?" said the priest, who was standing with his back to the hearth and leaning his shoulders against the mantle-shelf, while Marietta was sitting at a table in the middle of the room, with one or two large account books before her, with which she had been occupied before he had come in; "I have not seen it since the affair of that Roman investment I was fortunate enough to find for you was settled."

"Each year they go somewhat better than the year before, of course, Guido. I have been constant; and the multiplication table never deceives one!" replied Marietta, with a cold, sad smile.

"You *have* been constant;—constant in purpose and in effort, for twenty years. Very few women or men either can say as much. It is a long space for a never-flagging pull against an up-hill path, Marietta."

"Were the hill steeper, and the path much longer, I should not flinch from the collar, Guido. The end will come. And God knows that I am in no hurry for it to arrive, since the reaching it involves that dear old man's death."

"Must that need's be so?" asked the priest.

"I think so! I have thought much of it; and have more than once of late endeavoured to feel my way with him. And I am convinced that all might be lost by attempting to induce him to act;—especially taking into account the trouble about Sebastian, and the certainty, as things stand at the present moment, of meeting with impediment instead of co-operation from him."

"The matter is a thorny and complex one, certainly," replied the priest, musingly. "Still the old man has been so passive in your hands;—was so twenty years ago, and is surely likely to be much more so now."

"He has been passive, dear simple-hearted old man! because there has never been question of anything of any interest to him,—of anything he cared for. But I feel sure that now,—things being as they are unhappily with Sebastian,—if my uncle knew my secret, he would insist on throwing away all the great hope that has been so patiently laboured for."

"Twenty years ago," replied the priest, after musing in silence for a minute or two, "Sebastian could have given you no trouble; the game was in your own

hands; and your influence over the canon was all powerful. It is very questionable whether it would not have been the wiser course to have made him a partner in your enterprise from the beginning."

"And how much happier a life I should have led, had that been possible! Ah! *how* much happier!" exclaimed Marietta, clasping her long slender fingers, and gazing with a painful expression into vacancy, as her thought travelled back the path she had passed. "But from the beginning," she continued, speaking apparently rather to herself than to her companion, "I deceived him, or let him remain in error rather, for no deceit was ever necessary, because I came to feel that no help could be hoped from him in working out the sacred object. The first use I made of the influence you speak of, when my dear and ever-revered father died, was to induce him to occupy this apartment in the home of our ancestors, rather than seek one elsewhere. It was necessary for him to leave his old quarters, when Sebastian and I came to make part of his family, and fortunately our good Boccanera ascertained that these rooms were to let."

"No great influence was needed so far, it seems to me, my friend," rejoined the priest with a half sneer.

Marietta, without appearing to heed him, and still speaking rather to herself than to him, continued,—

"I could not have done better for him. It is a great length of stair for him certainly; but notwithstanding his great age he manages it without anything that can be called suffering, and the enjoyment of the *loggia* is everything to him. I think that his life has been comfortable, and his home not an unhappy one here. Dear, good, gentle-hearted uncle Giacomo!"

"As sunny a *loggia* might be found in Florence for money, I fancy, where an old man would not have to climb one weary step for every year in his life pretty well to reach it," returned Guidi, in the same cold hard tone; "and I have a notion that dear, gentle-hearted uncle Giacomo would appreciate very keenly a somewhat increased scale of expenditure on his daily table. It is never of any use, *Marietta mia*, to deceive ourselves with regard to our actions and the real motives for them, whomever else we may find it necessary to deceive."

"Nor have I ever deceived myself, nor sought to do so, Guido," returned Marietta, looking up into his face with a calm unflinching eye, and without the slightest access of colour on her marble-like cheek. "Do I deceive myself as to the one sole object for which I live, and have lived, and for the accomplishment of which, as far as lies within the power of my utmost effort, I am so deeply responsible,—I, and I alone, from the time that I was left sole depositary of so great a trust when my father died. It is never for one hour, waking or sleeping, absent from my mind. I know the aim, I know the means, I know all the pain,—I may say the agony, at times when faith in the aim has grown faint within me,—that it has cost me to use those means; I know that had the cost been suffering ten fold as great, I should not have been found wanting. No! I do not deceive myself."

"But why say that the responsibility which you took on your own shoulders was left to you alone. Was there not always the Canonico? Was he less charged with the duty due to his race and blood?" returned the handsome Canon of San Lorenzo, looking down from his standing position into the pale

face of Marietta, as she sate with her books before her at the table opposite to him, with the cold scrutinising eye of one who speaks neither to ask information nor express opinion of his own, but solely to explore and sound the heart of another.

"Nay, Signor Canonico," replied Marietta, looking up at him, as a slight curl passed over her finely-chiselled lip; "now you are speaking words which another indeed might speak, but which from you have no sincerity in them. You at least know, if no other on earth knows, how truly I say, that my great duty was laid upon my shoulders alone. Besides the reverence I owe and feel for my father's brother and the chief of our house, I love my uncle deeply and tenderly. It would be impossible for any one to live with him for twenty years and not to do so. He has a thousand qualities that deserve and attract love; but for the great end for which I live, you know well how totally and absolutely he is useless. And this, too, has been not the least among my trials. And he a Lunardi! But that is too old a sorrow to be suffered to press itself into the foreground now. From every flask you can but have the measure of wine it has been formed to contain!"

"And truly your books there, my thrifty Marietta, can show, I take it, that from the old flask in question has been poured out a measure of very goodly abundance. Is it possible that in all these years no notion, no suspicion of the real truth has ever crossed his mind?"

"No shadow of a thought upon the subject has ever occurred to him: of that I am very sure. Nor have I, as regards his comforts, any remorse——" the word seemed to startle her as it fell upon her ear

from her own tongue. "Remorse!" she said, interrupting herself, and raising her superb head and eyes proudly, "*remorse* I could have none to feel in any case! Is not the duty to which I am vowed paramount? And if I were weak enough to feel any such, would it not be part of my duty to bear *that* also, let it gnaw as it might, for the attainment of the end?"

"Nay! the old man has doubtless fared better in your hands, Marietta, than he would have fared without your truly Martha-like care. But you want to play Mary to him as well."

"And I do claim to have played both parts, and played them well and sincerely. When, after my venerated father's death, we came to live at my desire here, my uncle insisted on putting everything into my hands. His *governante*, he said, had, he was sure, always robbed him, and prevented him from contributing as largely as he could have wished to his brother's assistance. Now there would be but one purse, and one interest; and I must be a good housewife, and make the most of what there was. I did so, to the best of my ability. I knew then, as much as I know now, the end and object and duty of my life on earth; but I perceived only very confusedly and uncertainly any means for the accomplishment of it. They revealed themselves to me only gradually."

"The revelation, I presume, was mainly found in the last page of your household accounts for that first year," interrupted the priest, with the same cold half sneer.

"I set myself to the task before me to the best of my abilities," continued Marietta, unheeding his

interruption, "and in the spirit of one whose whole life had been a perpetual struggle with poverty. I took a girlish delight in exercising the new power committed to my hands, and in nursing up the favourable result to be proudly shown at the end of the year. Yes! to be shown in triumph to my uncle! For I had no conception as yet that Providence had placed in my hands the instrument with which my appointed task was to be accomplished. When, at the end of the year, I carried my accounts, showing a very considerable balance of income over expenditure, to my uncle, I could not persuade him even to look at them. He patted me on the head, and bade God bless me; said if I was contented he was happy; told me to go and buy myself a new dress, since there was money in hand, but to continue to be careful, as he should probably require another cassock next year. Since that day I have carried no accounts to my uncle."

"But have continued to be *very* careful, as he bade you—eh, Marietta?" said the priest.

"From that time I began to work for my object by the means thus put into my hands; and for twenty years I have been, as you say, *very* careful—careful from morning till evening, and from year's end to year's end."

"And now how stands the sum total of the results?" asked the priest.

"You must be tolerably well able to guess them, Guido," she replied, as a slight smile of subdued triumph passed over her face. "They are far beyond what I had dared to hope at the commencement of the long, unturning path. My uncle's additional preferment, the benefice in the Mugello to which he

was appointed soon after we came here, and the little chapelry in the city, that you obtained for him more recently, have helped much to forward the work. The investments found by you have all turned out well; and by the end of this year I shall be able to command some thirty-five thousand scudi. Is not the goal well-nigh reached, Guido?"

"Why that would seem to depend on various circumstances," answered the priest, speaking slowly, and looking at her fixedly the while, "over some of which you have no control."

"But the possession of the means is the chief point," replied Marietta, quickly. "That secured, I can use a little more of the patience that has stood me in such stead already. In your judgment, is the sum I have named sufficient?"

"For the purchase of the palace? I should think it was certainly more than the price of it. But——" here his reverence hesitated for a few seconds, then continued, "but there must be two parties to a sale. The present owner must be desirous of selling, as much as you are of buying, you know."

"But is there not reason to believe that such is likely to be the case some one of these days?" asked Marietta. "Besides common report, I have heard as much from yourself."

"Yes, one of these days.! But which of them is the question; and it may be an important one," said the priest, speaking the last words in his turn more to himself than to his companion. "You think it still necessary to leave the old man in error as to his pecuniary position?" he added, interrogatively.

"It is impossible to venture on doing otherwise,"

returned Marietta, with prompt decision. "Not that he, dear old man, would be angered or pained," she continued, "or would care whether thirty-five or thirty-five thousand scudi were in question. But the difficulty would lie with Sebastian. It would be impossible to prevent the old man from employing this money in the manner which would appear to him necessary for the securing what the boy thinks his happiness."

"Yes, I agree with you, that that would be probable," said Guido.

"It is hard, is it not," resumed Marietta, passing her hand across her high, pale brow, with a sigh, "that he on whom all my care, and toil, and hopes centre should be himself the most formidable stumbling-block in my path? And yet I love the boy dearly—very dearly."

"He *is* a boy," returned Guido, "and boys will seek their happiness otherwise than older heads and hearts would seek it for them. There have been others, Marietta, besides Sebastian, who have dreamed that the highest happiness earth can offer was to be found in the path by which he is bent on seeking it."

"And some there have been, Guido," she replied, with a sad solemnity of tone, "who have deemed such a thought no dream, yet have steadfastly put it away from them; who have comprehended that they had higher objects to live for than the pursuit of their own happiness."

"Steadfastly enough," said the priest, with a sadness which had yet a barely perceptible tone of sneering cynicism in it. "Steadfastly enough! Not more ruthlessly did Abraham raise the knife for the slaying of his first-born, than did you lay on the

altar of your idolatry the happiness of two human lives, twenty years ago. Have all those years brought with them no moments of regret for the irrevocable decision;—no doubts of the wisdom of it?"

"None," returned Marietta, solemnly, raising her face to meet his gaze as she spoke, with a clear, open brow and firm, calm eye, which seemed to challenge an inspection of her inmost heart; "neither doubts, regrets, nor wavering. No one moment of these twenty years has passed at which I would not have, had it needed, repeated my decision, and consecrated myself anew to my appointed vocation."

"You deserve success, Marietta," said the priest, gazing at her with a speculative curiosity mingled with admiration.

"And have I not nearly won it?" she returned, while, for the first time during the conversation, a flush crossed her pale cheek. "Happiness!" she continued, "what is happiness? Can the yielding to an inclination bring the joy born of devotion to a duty? Had I listened to your pleadings, Guido, and consented to give my life to other objects than that to which it was vowed from the cradle upwards, should I have found happiness, think you—even the happiness of one unpoisoned hour?"

"I say again, Marietta, that you merit success," said he, sadly.

"But why talk of two lives laid on the altar of my duty?" she continued. "Have you not also found a path of duty which would have been incompatible with the fate you were then so eager for?"

"Duty!" said the priest, with a stronger expression of the cold sneer which had more or less flavoured

the whole of his conversation, but which his companion did not seem to mark. "Yes, it is a grand word, with a marvellous tonic power in it to some minds. Yes! I have found a path—of duty, which is not without its satisfactions of its own kind. Well, at all events it is wiser to look forwards than backwards. I think it must be nearly the old gentleman's dinner time, is it not? I will just go and make my salutations to him, and then proceed on my path—of duty. *A rivederla, Signora!*"

CHAPTER V.

THE TWO HALVES OF THE PERINI PROPERTY.

WHEN Carlo Palli, the Fattore, and his son Nanni parted at the door of their inn, the "Papagallo," in order that the former might go to his business talk with his brother, the rich jeweller and money-lender on the Old Bridge, Giovanni half reluctantly proceeded to obey his father's behest by visiting and —so far as he should find himself enabled to do so— making love to his cousin Laura, the jeweller's only child and heiress.

To those who were in the confidence of Giuseppe Palli, or had any intimate knowledge of his affairs, this heiress-ship was known to be a very important matter. But such persons were very few indeed. There was his brother the Fattore; they had worked together too much to have many secrets from each other. There was his cousin Giuditta, a childless widow, who had kept his house for him for many years. There was his confidential man of law; and his partner Simone Boccanera,—partner only to a small extent of interest in the strictly jeweller's department of the business, the management of which was entirely in his hands. From being a foreman in the shop he had been admitted by Giuseppe Palli

to partnership some fifteen years before the time of which we are speaking, when the more profitable part of the jeweller's business had become sufficiently developed to require his whole time and attention. Besides these there were, perhaps, half a score or so of ruined spendthrifts, who had reason to conclude that there must be a considerable depth of water in an apparently small pool, into which sundry copious streams emptied themselves, and from which but very slender rills went out.

It was not the policy of Signor Giuseppe Palli to allow himself to become notorious as a very wealthy man. A prejudice, which the money-dealer knew to be anti-commercial in its ignorance, and felt to be unjust in its sentiments, weighed too heavily on his profession for it to be desirable to call the attention of the world more than was necessary to the wealth which had been accumulated by the exercise of it. The jeweller's house and style of living, therefore, were essentially modest and unostentatious,—a course which was rendered the more desirable to him from the nature of his plans with regard to his daughter. The Fattore, as has been seen, had thriven, if not quite so abundantly as his city-bred brother, yet very creditably. And it had long been understood between the two brothers that the foundations of the future greatness of the house of Palli could not be more advantageously laid than by availing themselves of the ruins and the site of the great Perini property as a substructure, and raising their edifice thereon in common.

Had these things been otherwise,—had the policy of the money-lender led him to adopt a shorter and more showy path in making his approaches towards

the social summities, Laura, the wealthy heiress, might have been a very conspicuous personage in the microcosm of Florence, instead of the obscure and simple little tradesman's daughter she seemed. In no society in the world was the maxim, that the ill savour which may have attended the process of getting money, does not adhere to the money got, ever more religiously believed and exactly acted on than in Grand-ducal Florence. And had Laura been presented to the world as heiress to the wealth she was in truth destined to inherit, she would have had no lack of noble suitors at her feet, even if they had had to make their way behind her father's counter to get to them.

Nanni Palli had, as we have seen, been that morning admitted by his father, to a very considerable extent, into the number of the select few who knew the real position of the Palli affairs and understood the family policy. And to do him justice, he had at once recognised the wisdom of his senior's intentions. It will be seen, when the reader comes to make acquaintance with Laura, that it was natural enough for her cousin to have been well inclined to let cousinship blossom into a little flirtation, even if it had not lain in the path of duty so to do. And for the last year or two he had not neglected such opportunities as his visits to Florence had afforded him of doing so. But now it had become clear that the paths of pleasure and duty were coincident in this matter. It now behoved him to set to work in a serious and business-like manner on the enterprise, which he had hitherto merely played with as an amateur.

Yet it was almost reluctantly that the young man betook himself to his task. He had decided in his

own mind, upon the Consuma, the day before, as may be remembered, that he unquestionably was very much in love with his cousin; but he had avowed to his father that his merely amateur advances had met with very little encouragement. And now, if it be indeed true, that "faint heart never won fair lady,"—though for my own part I utterly disbelieve in any "never" throughout the whole of this subject,—if the proverb *be* trustworthy, it did not seem that his success was likely to be greater. For assuredly Nanni's heart, though far enough from faint in general, was faint in this matter.

Yet it might have seemed to any one who knew the errand on which Nanni was bound, and the circumstances attending it, that judging from those appearances, which are held to count for so much in such matters, a likelier youth to speed well on such a quest could hardly be found. We have seen that he was a stalwart and good-looking young fellow even as he was muffled in his travelling wraps on the Consuma. And now as he steps out of the *Papagallo*, after having kept his father half an hour shouting for his breakfast, while he was changing his country costume, which was quite the thing in the Casentino, for a more city-like style of toilet, Nanni Palli is seen to be in reality a very handsome man.

Light, crisp hair with a glint of the sunshine in it; large, well-opened blue eyes, with a whole world of laughter and good humour in them; a ruddy brown cheek of health's own hue; a large full-lipped mouth expressive of genial honesty and kindness in every movement of its every muscle; and a firm, broad, round chin, made up one of those faces that a child instinctively loves and trusts. The forehead was

somewhat low; but then, thank heaven! every woman is not a phrenologist; nor, happily, is a large development of brain at all needed in the majority of cases for gaining woman's love.

In dress Nanni differed but little, as he sallied forth on his expedition, from any well-to-do Florentine young man of his age. Yet there was some subtle difference in cut or shape, or a somewhat freer use of colour perhaps, or a something in gait or bearing, which unmistakeably marked the countryman. Those whose eyes were practised in scanning Florentine men and manners would have seen also in his personal advantages,—in his broad shoulders and large chest, in the ruddy glow of the cheek, in the planting of the foot on the ground, in the freer and more easy carriage of the head and limbs, certain proof that the young man was a countryman, and no Florentine born. For the difference of race between the cockney born under the shadow of Giotto's Campanile, and the Tuscan *contadino*, especially him of the upper valley of the Arno, is very striking, and all to the advantage of the latter.

The Borgo dei Greci, in which the jeweller's house was situated, and to which Nanni accordingly now bent his way, is a narrow and unpretending street in the immediate neighbourhood of the large *piazza* of Santa Croce. There are, however, several good and solid mansions in it, as indeed there are few streets in Florence where such are not found, and one of the best of these belonged to Signor Giuseppe Palli. All the tradespeople and acquaintance of the jeweller called it a *palazzo*, but he called it simply a *casa*, though assuredly it merited the former appellation better than many a dwelling to which it was by

universal consent applied. The entire house belonged to Signor Palli, but he inhabited only the first floor of it, and let the remainder. He would have preferred himself to occupy the second floor in preference, and to have let the first, but had yielded on this point to the wishes of his daughter. The street door of the house always stood open during the daytime, but at the inner end of the entrance passage there was a door of open wooden trellis-work which closed the access to the staircase. By the side of this inner door there were four bell-handles arranged one above the other, and marked "Terreno," "Primo Piano," "2do Piano," "3o Piano." Laura had wished that a brass plate with "Giuseppe Palli" inscribed on it should be placed against the *primo piano* bell; but this was a piece of ostentation to which the jeweller could not consent. To live in a *primo piano* was bad enough, but to boast of doing so was too much.

To Nanni, however, no such indication was needed. In reply to his ring, the wooden-barred gate was opened by invisible hands; and by the time that he had mounted to the *primo piano*, he found the Signora Giuditta in person at the door of the apartment, waiting to admit him;—in person, for the old man, who was the jeweller's cook, footman, and *factotum*, was out at market *a fare le spese*, making the purchases for the day's housekeeping; and the servant girl was busy making the beds, and was, indeed, besides prohibited generally by Signora Giuditta from answering the door-bell, for fear that she should find an opportunity of spending five minutes in gossip—a danger which the old lady thought it more proper to incur herself.

"Signor Nanni!" exclaimed the cheery, active, red-apple-faced little old woman; "why, dear heart! who would have thought of seeing you in Florence this blessed morning. Laura! here is Nanni! Come out to him." (This was shouted at the top of her voice, and was intended to mean, "don't come out whatever you do; but run into your room and make any little changes desirable in your toilette for the receiving of such a guest.") "And is the Fattori come up; and how did you leave your dear mother, the good soul; and what has brought you to Florence; and how is the corn crop looking in the Casentino; and was it very cold coming over the Consuma; and what have you got in that basket?" pointing as she spoke to a little flag basket which Nanni had in his hand, and at last pausing for an answer to her final question.

"See for yourself, Aunt Giuditta," said the young man, addressing her by the common familiar appellation very generally applied to elderly females in Tuscany; "my mother sent the contents, whatever they are, to you. You townfolks, you know, like to taste a bit of country produce now and then, something more like what God made it than what you get from your rogues of Florence dealers."

"A pair of fat fowls, one of the *Fattoressa's* own cheeses, a dish of trout,—what beauties!—and a bottle of *Vin Santo!*" cried Signora Giuditta, as she excitedly examined the contents of the basket. "But come in, and let us talk a bit! What can Laura be doing?"

So the old lady bustled before him into the principal sitting-room, a large and pleasant chamber at the back of the house, looking into a small shady

garden, which the jeweller had treated himself to the expense of filling with choice camellias. Besides the ordinary articles of furniture, and the indispensable piano, there was at one of the windows a small table, with a variety of drawing apparatus upon it, which had evidently been in recent use. But the artist was no longer there. It would seem, that whatever might be the degree of favour or disfavour with which she looked on our friend Nanni, he was at least deemed worth expending so much shot on, as was involved in taking the warning her duenna had given her. Besides this drawing-table, there was another near it with modelling tools and materials on it; and what was still more unusual in a room devoted to the domestic use of the ladies of a middle class Florentine family, there was a small bookcase in one corner of the room filled with books. But if a visitor had had opportunity or curiosity to examine them, he would have found them to be all of one class. There was a well-thumbed copy of Vasari's Lives, the autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini, three or four collections of engraved gems, and one or two works on the art and practice of ornamentation. The collection of music too, which accompanied the piano, was much more abundant than what might generally be found in Florentine rooms of a similar class.

"Why, where on earth can Laura be gone!" cried Signora Giuditta; "she was here a minute ago, working at her everlasting drawing things. She will be here in a minute, no doubt."

Nanni was, if the truth must be told, somewhat relieved by the temporary absence of his cousin; but had she remained in the room, the worst of the matter would have been got over by this time,

whereas now he sat and watched the door by which she would enter with considerable nervous apprehension, while the old lady ran on with an interminable string of questions about the farm and his mother, and his journey to Florence, etc., etc., etc.

Presently the door opened, and Laura stood framed in the doorway.

A very beautiful girl in the first blush of developing womanhood!—very beautiful certainly; yet it was not every man who would have been much struck by her; and many, after they had been struck by, and had observed her, would have found sundry points to criticise in her appearance. The head, many would have said, was too small for the rest of the person; and the mode in which the abundant and glossy black tresses of her hair were bound *à la Grècque* succinctly round her head, added to this appearance. But it was impossible to deny that that charmingly-shaped little head was carried on its possibly too slender, but still beautifully-shaped neck, with rare grace and elegance. The features were small;—perhaps, again, it would be said too small for the height of the figure. But they were cut and moulded with exquisite delicacy; and if the profile was not of the purely classical Greek type, it was only because there were indications of intellect in it which are incompatible with the somewhat inane perfection of that style of beauty. There was a fullness about that part of the wide and pure forehead which was immediately above and beneath the straight and strongly-marked but delicately-slender black eyebrow, which indicates a strong development of the perceptive faculties, and is generally found to characterise artistic organisations. The long almond-shaped

eyes of the deepest shade of violet, which ordinarily lay couched tranquilly observant beneath the shelter of their remarkably long and regular silken lashes, rarely flashed with passion; but could on occasion quit their habitual expression of calm and meditative observation, deepening at times into dreamy reverie, to become liquid with the eloquence of a tenderness so infinite, that anyone fortunate enough to have caught them in their tell-tale mood, and capable of reading their language, would have needed no further observation to assure him that a moral nature lay below, deep down beneath thick piled concealing strata of maiden timidity and bashful reserve, exceptionally rich in vigour of moral sentiment,—richest of all in its infinite capacity of loving.

In consequence, doubtless, of some error or ignorance or other in our methods of managing the elements of human character and human happiness entrusted by the All-wise and All-good to our moulding, beautiful and delicate yet large and profound moral organisations of the type that has been partially and imperfectly described above, are very frequently found combined with undue and excessive delicacy and fragility of bodily constitution. In Laura Palli this was not the case. The eye of one accustomed to detect the manifestations of still latent malady would have been satisfied by the pure yet not too transparent hue of the cheek, by the elasticity of the light yet firm gait, and by the graceful vigour of every movement of the very slender but well-knit figure, that every function of the animal economy was in normal and healthy activity. And the subtler skill which traces abnormal bodily conditions in their effects on the manifestations of character, would have

been equally well satisfied, by a bright joyousness of bearing, which only a thoroughly healthy nature could combine with the meditative tendencies that have been previously remarked on, by the expression of arch humour which often curled the full rich lips and by transient gleams of fun and merriment that would occasionally laugh out from the more habitually thoughtful eyes.

How so bright and richly endowed a creature should have been the daughter of that dry-hearted, aristocratic-looking, old, money-getting machine, Giuseppe Palli! . . . . But there, we are getting quite out of our depth, "*Les races se féminiscent;*" says the French philosopher. And possibly our little social arrangements, as well as Nature's vast and unchanging laws, may contribute somewhat towards the apparent manifestation of the phenomenon. How this may have been in the case in question I know not. Livia Palli, Laura's mother, had passed from off the scene many years before those on whose reminiscences these pages are based knew any of the persons concerned in them. There is her tombstone, however, visibly extant in the cloister of St. Mark's; Signor Giuseppe Palli thereon states, that she was an admirable wife, and exemplary Christian; and having recorded this testimony, he never said anything more about her. We are left free to suppose therefore that the rich and genial nature of the money-lender's daughter was all inherited from her mother, "Livia Palli, *nata Carlini.*"

A more charming vision than Laura appeared, as she stood framed for an instant in the dark wooden doorway, where we left her to discourse on her perfections, could not well be imagined. Head too

small! Figure too slender for its height, rather above the average! Neck, perhaps, a thought too long and slender! Bah! Where was ever seen form of human mould in which a critic, inclined to carp, could find no possibility of doing so? Such as she stood there before Nanni, with her long, slender figure well defined by a sort of brown, artist-like blouse, close buttoned round the delicate throat, as closely at the exquisite little wrists, and gathered by a belt around her waist, it may be safely affirmed that he would not have trusted any critic, were it Apelles himself, with the altering of her, either to add or to take away a hair's breath in any direction.

"I ran away to wash my hands, Cousin Nanni, as soon as I heard who was at the door, for they were all over chalk; but I have not changed my blouse, you see; so I make no stranger of you. Welcome to Florence! How goes all in the Casentino?" And she held out to him a charming rose-pink little hand, long and slender, like the rest of her, with frank good-humour as she spoke.

"All quite well, Signora Laura," said Nanni, stepping forward to take her hand, blushing up to the roots of his hair as he did so. "Father and I came from Pelago this morning. He is gone to speak on business with my uncle on the bridge, and he would have me come here to you."

"That was very kind of uncle Carlo to us; but very hard upon you, my poor Nanni," returned she, with a wicked laugh in her eye. "Of course, you wanted to amuse yourself at Florence, and I don't wonder at your feeling it a bore, to be sent to this dull house, only it is rather cruel to tell us so."

"I, cousin! I never said so!" urged poor Nanni.

"I thought you said your father *would* have you come here," returned Laura, putting a strong emphasis on the word.

"Because I said to father, '*Babbo*,' said I, 'it will be too early for cousin Laura; had I not better go later in the day?'"

"Ah! but it is a bad way, cousin Nanni, to put off the disagreeables. Best to get them done and over; and then one is clear for more pleasant things."

"Now, cousin Laura, you know that's not it. You know that all I care to come to Florence for is to come here. You know that when I go back to the Casentino I can think of nothing but when I can come up next. Don't you know all this, Laura?"

This speech was an immense and unprecedented effort on the part of poor Nanni. He had hardly ever said so much, and certainly nothing half so tender before. It was clear that he was most conscientiously minded to do his duty after the manner in which his father had laid it down for him. And the short, quick, observant glance, that for an instant chased the light-hearted merriment from her face, showed that Laura took note of the change. But the previous expression returned in the next moment, as she replied,—

"Indeed, cousin Nanni, I neither know nor believe anything of the kind. I fancied that there was another house in this neighbourhood, not one hundred yards from the Arco di San Pietro, that would have been more likely to be in your thoughts, when you are far away in the Casentino. Come, now, cousin Nanni, out with the truth. Have you been to the Boccaneras this morning, eh?"

"I go to old Boccanera!" stammered Nanni, again

blushing all over his bronzed face and forehead. "What should I go there for, cousin Laura?"

"What for? Why to whisper a word in pretty Caterina's ear, to be sure;—and that word not to tell her that your father insisted on your going to her."

Poor Nanni was now utterly discomfited, and very ill at ease.

"I declare, cousin Laura," he said, "that it is very hard to say such things of me, and very unjust, too. Is it fair, now, Aunt Giuditta; I ask you?"

"You ask Aunt Giuditta because she knows so much about the matter, I suppose: is that it, Nanni? But why should you want to deny your liking for Caterina Boccanera. I am sure there is no reason to be ashamed of it."

"I declare, cousin Laura, I have no more thought about Caterina than I have about——"

"Then I declare that you ought to have; and more than that, that you must be a very insensible fellow, Nanni, not to think about her. *I* think a great deal about Caterina. She is one of the prettiest girls in Florence, and not far from the best of all."

"Caterina is a very pretty girl, there is no denying that, if one wanted to, which I am sure I don't; and I dare say she is a very good girl too. But——" and here Nanni looked up at the ceiling and down on the ground, and then hard at Aunt Giuditta, as if imploring her assistance, and showed general signs of distress,—"but," he continued, with a determined effort, "one cannot think much of one girl, however good and pretty, when one's heart is quite full of another a thousand times lovelier."

And then Nanni felt that now he had been and done it.

"Meaning me, of course, cousin Nanni? Well, really, that is a very pretty speech, and deserves a very low curtsey in return for it," said Laura, rising as she spoke, and making a magnificent and very gracefully executed curtsey. "Really, Nanni, you are improving," she continued, "and you are quite welcome to practise any amount of love-making on me; for it may be advantageous to you, and it won't make any difference to me, you know."

"Now, Laura, you are really too bad," interposed Aunt Giuditta. "What has Nanni said or done that you should treat him in this manner? There are greater ladies than you in Florence, I'll answer for it, who would be proud to be admired by Nanni Palli. No difference to you, indeed! I wonder you are not ashamed of yourself!"

"Why, what can I say to him?" rejoined Laura; "and how can any such talk make any difference to me in my position?"

Aunt Giuditta stared, and Nanni was startled into asking quickly, "What position, Laura; what do you mean?"

"Why! do not you know, cousin Nanni," replied Laura, with sad seriousness of voice and manner, while a furtive laugh glanced out of the corner of her eye; "don't you know that it has been decided that I am to take the veil? Yes! I am going to become a nun in the convent of the Theresians. The ceremony is to take place very shortly, and I shall make a point of your presence in the chapel."

Aunt Giuditta opened her eyes to their utmost extent, in mute astonishment at this announce-

ment; and, "You don't mean it?" faltered poor Nanni.

"Oh, yes, I do mean it!" rejoined Laura; "or it is, at all events, very possible that I may come to mean it very seriously, one of these days. So you see that all such fine speeches are thrown away upon me, as I said; and that you would be far wiser to carry them to Casa Boccanera. And I don't see what is the harm of saying that, Aunt Giuditta, I am sure!"

"Harm!" re-echoed the old lady. "I don't know what has come to you to-day, Madamigella Laura, for my part! And the Theresians, too! A pretty story, truly, for Giuseppe Palli's daughter. But don't you heed a word she says, Signor Nanni. Queer chancey things, girls are!"

"I do think that it would be a thousand pities for you to go into a convent, cousin," said matter-of-fact Nanni; "and I don't think my uncle would ever consent to it, that's more. But what could make you think of taking the veil, cousin Laura?" he added, with curious interest.

"A vocation, of course!" she replied, looking at him seriously, but with a furtive smile on her lip; "a vocation for passive obedience and singing matins at midnight."

"But you might do your passive obedience, without going into a nunnery for it," argued Nanni, who began to think that if the two halves of the Perini estates were to be re-united, it would have to be accomplished by an exercise of parental authority on the part of his uncle.

Laura remained silent for a while after this home thrust, and then said, "Which would you rather,

Nanni, marry a wife not of your own choosing, or remain a bachelor to the end of your days?"

"Which would I rather?" repeated Nanni, slowly and carefully, like a man who has had a riddle proposed to him; "which would I rather, marry a wife of my own choosing, or remain . . . ." but at that point he was interrupted by a ringing at the door-bell, and Aunt Giuditta hastened to anticipate the maid in opening it.

"Here is Signor Sebastiano de' Lunardi!" said she returning the next minute with a young man about the same age as Nanni Palli, but of appearance as singularly contrasted with that of the young farmer as the outward presentment of one man can well be with that of another.

CHAPTER VI.

WHICH SHALL IT BE?

A CONSIDERABLE amount of insight into the character of any woman might have been obtained, and a shrewd guess as to the category of temperament to which she belonged have been hazarded by any one who could have got her answer to the question, which of those two young men, Giovanni Palli or Sebastiano de' Lunardi she thought the handsomest. The polling of the votes of a large and varied female constituency on the question would have been so even that the contest would have been a close and doubtful one up to the close of the poll. To either party it would have appeared a wonderful and incomprehensible thing that their opponents should be able to contest the matter with them for a moment. The red ribbons—those would have been the Palli colours—would have most contemptuously scouted the claims and arguments of the other party. And the sky-blue streamers, which would have been selected as their badge by the Lunardi faction, though more capable of appreciating the good points of the rival candidate, would have deemed it truly preposterous to put advantages which they would not have attempted to deny into competition with those of their own favourite.

My own impression is, that the reds would have had among them a greater number of voters on the shadier, and, of course, wiser, side of thirty years of age; and the blues a majority of such as had not arrived at those years of matured discretion. I am not sure, however, that this proportion might not have been reversed if voters in short frocks and trousers had been admitted to the poll.

There was unquestionably very much to admire in the outward forms and features, and in the inward and more or less spiritual graces expressed by them, of both these curiously contrasted young men. Each had what the other lacked. Ah! why not combine the two into one phœnix, and win all votes and sympathies! Amiable Utopist! Nature has declined to attempt such combinations. In mythologies and romances we have, it is true, winged horses and miraculous self-contradictory heroes. But what an ugly brute is Pegasus in comparison with Eclipse!

Sebastian was a very little taller than Nanni; but the greater slightness of his build made him seem much more so. Though fairly healthy, well proportioned, and active in his movements, an eye practised in estimating such matters would have seen at half a glance that Palli could have crushed him in his gripe and tossed him out of the window, as if he had been a baby. His hair and beard were fair in colour, and fine in texture. The latter, unlike the strong light brown and stiff curls, which the young farmer wore trimmed closely in the form of a segment of a circle around his jolly good-humoured face, was cut to an elongated point beneath his chin; and the former, retreating so as to leave bare the entire temples, showed the large and lofty expanse of a very white

and very beautifully-formed forehead, on the sides of which the pale-blue lines of the veins were very visible. The eyes were blue, like those of Palli, but they were, when at rest, of a tint several shades fainter. They were, however, far more subject to changing than those of the young farmer. In fact, they were rarely tranquil for many minutes together, those strange fascinating eyes, which so irresistibly magnetised organisations in any degree attuned to accord with those of their owner! Every passing emotion, every fleeting idea seemed to mirror itself, as it passed, in those large limpid eyes, which would dilate and contract, pale and deepen in colour, and run through the whole gamut of passion in expression with the fickle mobility of cloud-shadows across a sunny sky.

The lower part of the face, the jaw, cheeks, mouth and chin, were almost of the pure Greek statuesque type, so beautiful in form, that it seemed a pity that any part of the outline should be hidden by a beard. There was infinite sweetness about the varied phases of the expression of the mouth, but the entire face did not give one the impression of strength. A physiognomist would have been apt to say of him, as the dying patriarch said of the son, whose nature he had carefully marked, "Unstable as water, thou shalt not excel." Unhappily, the same observer might have also read in the lines and moods of that mobile countenance a very strong desire of excelling. The two qualities are disastrously united in the same idiosyncracy with strange frequency, demonstrating, by the production of misery, error somewhere in our breeding or educational processes.

To excel is assuredly excellent, but it is not the

best thing the world has to offer by a very great deal. And it would behove any heart that might assume the duty and acquire the right of sharing the joys and sorrows of that not thoroughly well-balanced nature, to find the means of bringing it to feel and to acknowledge that there was better happiness in store within its reach, than that which it strove to catch at, even at the cost of reiterated agonies of failure.

Yes, clearly enough, this delicate love-inviting nature would need support from a yoke-fellow and life companion. Not incapable of giving support in many cases and circumstances, it would yet often require it in turn; and the helpmate fitted for Sebastian would be one who could be leant on, as well as lean. Stalwart Nanni Palli on the contrary, stalwart in body, and stalwart in character, with his strong right arm, wide chest, clear steadfast eye, and firm broad chin, was very visibly the man to buckler her he loved against a thousand, not only of foes, but of cares, weaknesses, and sorrows. That was a nature always to give and never to ask support—within the sphere and range of its capabilities.

And if we had been able to commit the indiscretion of reading down at the very bottom of Laura's maiden heart, and had copied the above estimate of the characters of the two men from what we found recorded there, it would have stood very much as at present it stands written. She had known them both for many years, the heir to all the blood of all the Lunardi almost as long as her cousin. For in those days, when the ruined Conte Rinaldo had lodged with Simone Boccanera, the then young foreman of Giuseppe Palli, a certain degree of acquaintanceship

had grown up between the elders of the Palli and Lunardi families, but a much greater degree of intimacy had ensued between the younger branches, both the boy Lunardi and the girl Palli being baby friends of two contemporaneous scions of the Boccanera race.

Sebastiano was entering the room eagerly, and quite at his ease, when the unexpected sight of Nanni Palli there evidently disconcerted him, and made him feel shy and embarrassed. The two young men were acquainted with each other, and there was no sort of dislike or ill-feeling between them, though it was impossible that there should be much of mutual comprehension.

Laura was at the window, seated at her drawing table, at the farthest part of the room, when he came in; and though she looked up with a pleasant smile, she had not risen from her seat to receive him. But perceiving in an instant the little change of manner which has been noticed, she immediately got up, and went across the room to meet him, holding out the little slender hand she had so frankly placed in her cousin's brown broad palm, but not so boldly and unreservedly bringing it into contact with the small nervous hand which, now almost as timidly as her own, came to meet it.

However, the hand-shake and the salutation were performed, and Sebastian, having first bowed to Nanni, and then returned on second thoughts to shake hands with him, to the great mystification and wonderment of the young farmer, seated himself at the far end of the room.

"I came, Signora Laura," he began, "to bring you an old trinket belonging to my uncle, which the

Gobbo * Boccanera came to our house to ask for. He said you wanted such a thing for a design you were engaged on for the shop. I hope it may be of service to you."

"Yes, I told the *Gobbo* that I thought it very likely the *Canonico* might have something of the sort. I am trying to contrive something in the good old style to turn these big irregular-shaped pearls to account. If Simone Boccanera had his way, I should do nothing but work hard for the shop all day."

"Why do you let him bother you with it at all, cousin Laura?" said Nanni. "I am sure I would not in your place. Uncle Beppe cannot want you to soil your pretty fingers with clay and chalk, and things."

"Oh, I would not give up my drawing and modelling. And I like nothing better than to see my fancies put into permanent materials at the shop. But master Boccanera has the most outrageously exaggerated notion of the value of my designs; and administers his flattery by insisting on my working very hard sometimes."

"Well, I declare it is a shame!" said Nanni, "and I shall tell my uncle so."

"And do not *you* think I am very hardly used?" said Laura, with a glance of mock distress at Sebastian.

"I fear me, Signora, I must range myself on the part of the enemy, and follow Signor Boccanera's example of preferring the work to the ease of the artist," replied the young man.

"And *you* have no mercy for my poor hands, be-

* *Gobbo*, humpbacked. The word is very constantly used in speaking of one so deformed, without any notion of ridicule, reproach, or even discourtesy.

smirched with clay and charcoal, and chalk-dust, *'gnor* Sebastiano," returned Laura, giving him a laughing side-glance.

"As if such hands and fingers as those were made for working," said Nanni.

"Well, I am afraid they were," rejoined Sebastian.

"There's a hand made for work, and ready for it," cried Nanni, holding out his great broad hand, with some pride in its strength and vigour, "but it don't look much the same sort of machine as the hand of my cousin."

"Nor is the work expected from it the same," replied the other, mildly.

"But it would spoil such fingers as Laura has," urged Nanni, with an admiring look at the objects of his defence.

"I do not think that any mischief has been done them yet," said Sebastian, smiling; "and they have produced a good deal."

"Ah! you don't see it;" said Laura; "but cousin Nanni is more critical, and looks closer."

And so the talk went on with such like mild raillery and sparring, after the fashion of lads and lasses under similar circumstances. No word of greater interest or importance was said between them, than such innocent prattling as that in the specimen recorded. And yet, if an observant listener, and one not altogether an outer barbarian in such matters, had been present, he would have been able to form a very shrewd guess of the state of things existing between the parties. Such looker-on at the game would have felt strongly persuaded that if pretty Laura was fancy-free as regarded her cousin, she was hardly equally so with regard to the

noble scion of the house of Lunardi. He would have convinced himself that the heart of the latter had been wholly and utterly given into the keeping of the jeweller's daughter; it would have been perfectly clear to him, that the two perfectly well understood one another; but he would have remarked that, despite this, the manner of the young patrician was very far from that of an assured and accepted lover. It was, on the contrary, timid, at times almost depressed, and by no means confident. It would have been still more clearly evident to such supposed spy on the little party, that, though the handsome young farmer was very certainly bent on making himself as agreeable to his lovely cousin as he could, it would not be matter of heartbreak to him when he should discover that his efforts were in vain. It was further plain, either that he had not convinced himself of that fact, or that he had no suspicion that Sebastian was in anywise the cause of it; or finally, that he was of too loyal, frank, and kindly a nature to hate him for it. For, although there was, as has been said, a little sparring between the young men—all very much to the advantage of the favoured lover, as such tilting matches played in such lists are apt to be—they were evidently on good terms with each other, and there was no serious ill-will or bad blood between them.

Aunt Giuditta meanwhile had cares with reference to the dinner to be prepared for the *Fattore* and his son, who would of course dine that day with them, heavy on her mind, and she kept alternating her superintendence between the drawing-room and the kitchen. On one occasion of her thus leaving the room, Laura followed her; and the result of their

private conference was apparent, when the old lady, on returning to it, said very graciously:

"The *Fattore* and Signor Nanni are going to dine with us to-day; they came up from the Casentino this morning. It would give us much pleasure if you would join us, Signor Sebastiano."

"You are very kind," said he, with a flush of pleasure, as he spoke his thanks to one lady, while he looked them to the other; "I should very much like to come. But I must walk home with the *Canonico* from vespers, you know. That is my daily duty. I meet him at the door of the *Duomo* as he comes out. But when I have seen him home, I can run off, and be in time for your dinner-hour here."

So it was settled that he should dine with them shortly after the hour at which the *Fattore* expected to get away from his interview with the *padrone* at the palace.

"And there'll be a dish of trout such as you don't see every day in Florence, I can tell you; though I say it who should not, for I caught them every one, cousin Laura, with my own line. But they are prime ones. There is not a brook in the Casentino like ours for trout."

"They are as lovely fish as ever were put on a dish, that I will say," chimed in Aunt Giuditta.

"And now good-by, Laura, till dinner-time; for I must go and look up a fellow who owes a lot of money for timber. Good-by, cousin Laura," said honest Nanni, as he committed the unpardonable piece of bad generalship of leaving his rival in possession of the field of battle.

"What a dear, good, honest fellow cousin Nanni is!" said Laura, as soon as the door had closed on

him. "I must have you estimate him at his due worth, Bastiano *mio* !"

"I think I do, Laura. I always thought him a kindly, loyal nature," returned her lover.

"Ah ! but I have been thinking, my friend, that his good feeling and good will may be very important matters to us."

"Ah ! Laura, Laura ! You are more hopeful than I can be ! " sighed her lover.

"Then I must have hope and courage for both ! " replied she, with a bright and sunny smile. "But you let yourself be too faint-hearted, my Bastiano," she continued. "Have you not faith in me ? "

"But that is all I have, *Laura mia*," he replied. "Faith in you ! Yes, all faith in your affection, in your firmness, in your courage ! But I have no faith in anything else ! "

"None in yourself, Bastiano ?" she said, shaking her head at him gravely. "If you have not, I have ! "

"How can I have faith in myself, Laura ? What have I done to generate or justify it ? I am a ruined noble—ruined, I suppose, because ruin was what we prepared for ourselves and deserved—and I am as incapable of mending that ruin as any of the other ruined heirs of noble families around me. I attempt to do something in music, the only path which seemed open to me, and in which I seemed to myself capable of doing anything ; and you know with what success ! What faith can a man have in himself, whose life is a chronicle of incapacities and failures ? "

"It would be no longer faith, but certainty, my friend, if you had from the first found nothing but

success. But an artist, more than any other man, my Bastiano, should have faith in himself—abiding and self-sustaining; not vain self-satisfaction, easily contented; not complacent assurance that the goal has been reached, but hopeful self-reliance on the capacity for reaching it!"

"Ah, Laura, you are my Egeria, you are my inspiration!" he cried, as he caught in his the beautiful little hand she had raised in the earnestness of speaking. And, indeed, a better impersonation of an inspiring Egeria could hardly be imagined than the tall, slender figure in its simple brown holland blouse, with one hand and demonstrative forefinger raised in air, flushed cheek, and animated, but gravely earnest eye.

The upraised hand was dropped, but not withdrawn from his grasp; and the calm, large eyes darkened to the deepest tint of the violet, full of overflowing tenderness, yet grave with the instinctive consciousness of power and force of will, looking earnestly into his, as seeking to infuse into them the contagion of their own hopeful firmness.

"You know," he continued, "how often your strength has strengthened me; how I have striven to hope when you bade me hope; how, in the absence of all other hope, at least that of your approbation has been sufficient to sustain me; how your counsels and helpful words have made possible to me what, without them, would have been impossible. But, Laura, all this does not touch the one vital point of all. If that were safe, I think—I know that I could have faith, and labour faithfully; the world would be all bright to me, and disappointed ambition be only the spur to fresh effort."

Here the little hand was withdrawn from his, and again raised up in admonition.

"Have faith, I have said, Bastiano, in yourself. Have faith also, I now say, in me."

"Boundless faith!—no devotee had ever faith in his saint more boundless than I have in your priceless affection, my Laura! But in your power to rule your destiny and mine? . . . . . Is it not only too clear to see the purpose for which your cousin comes here? Is it not too evident that that purpose is approved and shared by your father and by his? Is not your lot marked out for you? It needs no great cunning to see it. Why, is it not natural—the two cousins—the only son and the only daughter? The putting together the family property? It is clear, self-evident, a matter of course! So safe a matter of course that your father never dreams of the possibility of seeing aught objectionable in my visits here."

"Now, *Bastianino mio*," she said, slowly shaking her head, with a sad smile, "is there in the wide world another save yourself who could extract matter for unhappiness and discontent from the fact that you have not been forbidden the house? *Davvero, davvero, questo è proprio tuo.*" *

"Nay, Laura, not that," he answered; "but can it be, that I should not be sharpsighted for every augury and omen that threatens my all of happiness in this life? Can you at all figure to yourself, I wonder, what the world would be to me,—what it will be, when you are definitively taken from me and given to another? For a man to protest that he cannot live without the woman he loves is a very common phrase, and very much of course. But do you not *know*

* Truly, truly, this is exactly thine own.

that, in sober earnest, I could not live? You know well that I should never raise my hand against my own life any more than against that of another. But there would be no need of hands. I could not live! What would be art, ambition, hope, sunshine, air, the world, if I lose you? Say, rather, what will they be when I do lose you? I cannot blind myself!"

And he let his head fall on his breast as he spoke, with an attitude and expression that would have made an invaluable study for an Adam passing from out of the gates of Paradise.

But the sweet daughter of Eve beside him would consent to share in no such hopeless banishment.

"*Bastianino mio*," she said, after a short pause, as her hand timidly stole out to take his, while her eyes veiled themselves entirely beneath their long lashes, and her face was bent towards the ground, "your desponding nature drives me to say what, perhaps, a girl should abstain from saying, and what surely you ought not to need to be said. But as I truly would give my life, were it needed, to make your happiness, so I will sacrifice any feeling, that . . . . . that would prevent my saying what may bring you comfort. Do you not know, my Sebastiano, that the world would be as much a hopeless void to me without your love, as it could be to you apart from me? It may be that my father and my uncle Carlo have formed a project of a marriage between Nanni and me. But to me nothing has been said as yet on the subject; and I do not think that my father would attempt to constrain me against my will. I do not think that dear, good Nanni would persevere in a suit that made me unhappy. But if

it were otherwise,—if sorrow, and contention, and reproach, and anger have to be endured, I can endure them. Sebastian, I will be no wife, if I be not thine. Have you now faith in me, my poor Sebastian?"

She looked up as she finished speaking, and her eyes met his. There was the slightest shadow of mild reproach mingled with the unspeakable wealth of affection which welled forth from their depths. Sebastian marked it, and felt that he had more than deserved it. But it was not in him to repent of the short-coming which had had for result to draw forth words which had poured new life into his veins.

"My own Laura! Generous, noble, loving, courageous,—giving of your strength to sustain my weakness. That I should say 'My Laura!' and yet dare to grumble at my fate. How much more happiness have I even now than I have ever deserved? I will be strong! my Laura. I will deserve your affection and your generous devotion! I will have faith! Can you forgive me for having lacked it?"

Laura made no reply in words; but if the half loving, half arch, sly side-glance with which she looked up at him had been duly translated, it might have been read to signify, that if she had not been able to forgive him for having lacked faith and courage seventy times seven, she would not have cared to discuss the matter now.

"But the opera you are now at work on, Bastiano; you have had no vexation with regard to that. You know what your uncle said of the quartette at the end of the first act?"

"Yes, Laura; and I was very much pleased. But

still, you know, though my poor dear uncle is a real judge of music, yet the musical world is not what it was in his day; and then, you know, all my geese are swans to him, dear old man!"

"But my father spoke very highly of it too; and he knows what good music is, and had no prejudice in the matter."

"Beyond the courteous desire of agreeing with and pleasing my uncle."

"Oh! you unbelieving Thomas! I am sure *I* thought it the most exquisite quartette I had ever heard; and you won't suspect *me* of any prejudice in the matter," she added, with a bright smile.

"Certainly not," he replied, in the same vein; "in you I am sure to find a stern and rigorous critic; and that you know is what we artists always profess to wish for. I wanted to have a little talk with you about the idea of the chorus preceding the quartette. But I must run away to the *Duomo*. I would not have my uncle miss me at the door, when he comes out from vespers, for anything."

"Why you don't mean it is so late as that!" exclaimed Laura, jumping up. "How the time has slipped away! And there is my drawing as much advanced as it was three hours ago! And I have lost all the morning! . . . . . No! not lost, I hope, Sebastian!" she added, as changing her tone and expression of face in the rapid manner peculiar to her, she looked into his eyes with one of those calm and soft but serious glances, which had so eloquently enforced her previous remonstrances and exhortations; "not lost, I trust. I have given you some comfort, my Bastiano; have I not? And you will be good, and trustful, and not de-

spondent, will you not?—trustful in me and in your own self."

"My own sweet monitress! I *will* strive to be all you would have me, Laura! I will begin by trusting that I shall be able to profit by your lesson of this morning. I will be hopeful!"

"And now run to meet your uncle. And I must get ready and help Aunt Giuditta to make ready for receiving our guests. If her heart had not been very intent on that matter, we should hardly have had so uninterrupted a talk, my friend! Now run; I had no idea it was so late!"

"*A rivederti fra poco!*" he said, as he took her hand once again, before hurrying down the stair.

Sebastiano was in time not only to meet the old canon at the side door of the *Duomo*, opposite to the *Sasso di Dante*, on the southern side of the nave, by which his uncle invariably quitted the church, but at the door of the sacristy inside the huge building.

"I do not feel as if I needed an arm to-day, my dear boy," said the old man, cheerily, as he came out from disrobing himself. "I feel as firm on my legs as the Campanile there, which is older than even I. Not but that I should be sorry to miss the companion of my walk."

He paused as he reached the door of the church, and slowly facing about, bowed reverently in the direction of the high altar before crossing the threshold.

"There is poor old Canon Geloni's chair, waiting for him," he continued, as he pertinaciously refused his great-nephew's arm in descending the one or two steps; "he is ten years my junior,—ten years if he is a day; I was a canon eleven years before he belonged to the chapter, and he is obliged to have a

chair, though he has not half so far to go as I have, and not a quarter of the stairs to go up to get home. Poor man! I have very much to be thankful for! And not least for the kind folks and kind faces that are around me, when I do get home, *Bastianino mio;* poor old Geloni has nobody at home but his housekeeper!"

"I sometimes think, uncle, that those stairs at home are getting a little too much for you."

"Not a bit of it, my boy! not a bit of it! It is my exercise that keeps me in health. If our good Marietta did not know that, she would never let me live there. It is the exercise that keeps me going! And one other thing,—one other thing that poor old Geloni has not got. There is no violin on his table at home, waiting to welcome him. It is our divine art, my Sebastian, that is the solace and support of my old age; and it is not every old *primo* who has such a *secondo* always at his elbow, and always ready to indulge an old man's old-fashioned tastes, as I know who!"

"Dear uncle! what should I know of music if it had not been for you?"

"Ta . . . . ta . . . . . ta! You have it in your blood, my boy! Music is born in one man, as much as gout is in another. I don't say that I may not have counted for something in the formation of your taste. We have been useful to each other, my Sebastian!"

"But your tastes are not old fashioned, uncle; quite the contrary," returned the younger musician, "who appreciates the grand music of Beethoven as you do?"

"Truly, my boy, the German is a grand fellow; a

great master, indeed. Perhaps he has obtained orchestral effects which had never been equalled before. And I do, as you say, appreciate his symphonies. But I can't give up my Boccherini,—divine, soul-elevating Boccherini. What can surpass in ravishing melody and noble sentiment the quartettes, the sestuors, the quintettes of the sublime Lucchese!"*

"But I love Boccherini as well as you do; and am always, for my part, as ready for an evening with him as with Beethoven. Beethoven is more dramatic in feeling and treatment."

"May be so, my boy! And I tell you what, Sebastian, I want to try that last quartette of his that came last week. Don't you long for it? When will Marietta let us have an evening, eh? . . . . Just as if she was not always ready and willing to procure me a pleasure, dear, good, kind Marietta! What a daughter she has been to me! and what a mother to you, my boy! What should we ever have been without her?"

"Helpless enough, both of us, I dare say, uncle. I don't think that either you or I have a very special talent for housekeeping. Marietta has been the providence of the family. But I would give much—if I had it—to make our dear Marietta think that there may be some things in this world worth living and working for besides the honour and glory of the Lunardi name. You know, uncle, that I have cause to wish it."

"And I wish it too, with all my heart, for your sake, my dear boy!" replied the old canon; "but what would you have? Her father, my poor brother Rinaldo, was just like her. I suppose it is born in

* Boccherini was born at Lucca in 1740.

some people, as I said music is in others. She was born and bred in no other thought from the cradle upwards than how to raise up the family to its old position. And then all the family misfortunes . . . ! Poor Marietta ! She was as good a daughter to my poor, dear brother as she has been good as daughter, housekeeper, friend, and nurse to me ! I wish I could bring back honour and glory to the old name, for her sake, Heaven bless her ! But I must leave that to you, young sir ! You are the hope of the Lunardi race, and of our dear Marietta now !"

"Yes !" replied the young man, with a deep sigh ; "I wish with all my heart it were not so."

"But Sebastian, my dear boy, I don't see how poor Marietta can either make or mar your matters with the wealthy jeweller's daughter. If you had her good wishes ever so much, the rich man would not be more likely to give his daughter to thee, my poor boy."

"That is true, uncle," returned Sebastian, with a deep sigh. "But we should then, at all events, be of one mind in a house ; and I should not have the pain of thinking, that one whom I love as I do Marietta, was anxiously bent on frustrating my own dearest hope ! Would that she could be brought to see things as you and I do, my dear uncle, and value them with our balances !"

"And I would that I had the power of helping thee, my Sebastian. Thou knowest how proud and happy I should be to see thy pretty Laura a daughter of our house. No Lunardi ever mated with a worthier, I trow ! But as things are, it is seeking sorrow to no profit to talk with our Marietta on the point. Best leave it in silence ! And now, my

dear boy, I will accept of your arm to help me up the stairs."

So the old man went into the room opening on the terrace, in which we were present at a conversation between Marietta and her friend and confidant, the Canon Guidi of San Lorenzo, intent on sounding his niece on the subject of his projected quartette party; and the young man raced back in all haste to his engagement at the house of the jeweller.

CHAPTER VII.

THE QUARTETTE PARTY.

THE dinner at the jeweller's passed off better than might, perhaps, have been anticipated from all the circumstances of the individuals composing it. For the elders of the party, of course, the dish of Casentino trout, and other matters of Aunt Giuditta's providing, sufficed to secure a satisfactory amount of happiness. And how excellent and desirable a thing, my friends, it is, to have driven one's barque through the troublous breakers that tossed it so about in the early part of our voyage, and to have reached the calm and tranquil waters, wherein a dish of trout and a flask of Montepulciano may be safely trusted to make our contentment!

The two brothers and Aunt Giuditta enjoyed their hour. There was no doubt or mistake about it; for their digestions were good. But of the younger trio, Laura and her two admirers, was there one who could say that the little festival had afforded them the pleasure they had each anticipated from it? So sad and troublesome a thing, my friends, is it to have one's twenty-fifth year still before one! And the jackanapes who hints at sour grapes is a puppy, who will find out his mistake some day.

As for Sebastian, if I had been in his place, I would have excused myself from accepting that invitation to dinner; or rather, if he had been in my place,—which is a very different thing,—he would have done so. What could he expect? Of course, he jumped at the hook,—stupid gudgeon as he was,—seeing nothing but the brilliant shining fly, represented by the prospect of passing an hour in the presence of his idol. Of course, under the circumstances of the case, he had an hour of wretchedness. It was not in the nature of things that it should be otherwise, given the position and relationship of the parties present on the occasion. Of course, the unreasonable simpleton sate on thorns the whole time. Of course, the position, which justified and indeed required Nanni to be assiduous before his father and uncle in the duty of making love to his cousin, while he, poor penniless patrician, dared not, in the same presence, make any love at all, was intolerable to him. Of course, every word and glance of kindness and friendly intercourse between the cousins was a stab to his heart. Of course, his misery was very faithfully expressed on his by no means illegible features; and, of course, as poor Laura could only venture, every now and then, and not every minute, as he would have had her, to give him a transient and furtive but eloquent glance of encouragement and comfort, he was discontented with her as with all the rest of the world.

Good, honest Nanni, though far from being equally miserable, and though not wholly incapacitated by rebellious feelings from taking his share of the enjoyment of the good things before him,—for he had lived in the open air of the fields, and his

nervous system had been thus fortified, you see,—was yet not altogether happy and at his ease. In the first place, he had the consciousness that he was doing badly what he had to do, and was anxious to do well. His feelings towards Sebastian were very much more kindly and free from gall than, it may be feared, those of the sensitive artist were towards him. Still he did not understand nor altogether like his presence there. His uncle, it is true, was, as he well knew, a violinist, and in the habit of making one in the little quartette parties at the old *Canonico's* lodgings; and he supposed that the footing of the young musician in the house was due to this community of tastes, and to the acquaintanceship between the families, which having arisen long years ago, out of the connection with the Boccaneras which has been mentioned, had been continued and improved by means of their musical sympathies. Still it did seem to him that that pale thread-paper of a youngster kept looking at Laura in a way he could not quite understand. Probably, it was only their town-bred way of doing the genteel thing. It was not to be supposed that such a girl as Laura could look with favour on such a washed-out stripling, with bean-water * instead of blood in his veins. Pshaw! That was quite out of the question. And besides, for a penniless musician to think of Laura Palli! A pretty thing indeed! No, there was no cause to trouble his head about the young man, and his queer ways, and his looks. If it was the fashion for folk to turn up the whites of their eyes like slaughtered sheep, the lad was quite welcome to do what he liked with his eyes, for him!

* A common Tuscan phrase.

Still Nanni was not at his ease. The frank, easy, open-hearted, cousinly kindness of Laura's manner to him, while it made him like her all the better, yet somehow or other caused him instinctively to feel that it was not the exact thing that was wanted, and it was not precisely the footing on which it behoved him to stand with his cousin, and did not seem to have any tendency to lead towards that. And then again honest, jolly Nanni was made a little uncomfortable at moments by a kind of suspicion that he made an inferior figure to the town lad in the way of talk; that he often could not understand the drift of his cousin's conversation; that it turned frequently on matters of which he knew nothing, and in which he took no interest; while that fellow there was quite at home in it all. Not that he thought that women cared much for talk in a man; they liked to do the talking themselves. But then he could not help remembering that, somehow or other, he did talk with Caterina Boccanera; that, in fact, when with her he did most of the talking, and that her manner to him was altogether very different from that of cousin Laura. And he had a very shrewd suspicion that the style of Caterina's intercourse with him was more after the matter of that natural to a girl who has no objection whatever, but rather the contrary, to your making love to her.

So the dinner was a failure also, as far as poor Nanni was concerned.

As to Laura, it is abundantly clear that she had no pleasant time of it, while seated between Nanni and her uncle, and opposite to Sebastian; she had to do her duty as hostess to her guests with cheerful courtesy, and to oppose light-hearted raillery and frank

laughing cousinship to Nanni's not very hard-pushed attempts to establish a tenderer style of intercourse between them, while keeping all the time a nervous watch over the conduct of Sebastian, dreading that he should expose himself to observation by the air of misery which he could not conceal, bleeding at heart for all that she knew he was suffering, and vigilantly spying every favourable opportunity for darting across to him a telegraphic glance of consolation.

No! assuredly Laura did not enjoy that dinner party, despite the fineness of the trout, and the excellence of the wine. But then she alone had probably never expected anything much better from it. And she had manœuvred for Sebastian to be invited, only to save him from the torments she well knew he would inflict on himself, if left to poison his imagination with pictures of her cousin making love to her during his enforced absence.

Dear, courageous, tender-hearted Laura! It is a small matter to pity and make allowances for weaknesses and follies which we share and sympathise with. The rare thing is to comprehend and uncontemptuously pity those to which our own happier or stronger temperament is a stranger.

Surely, my elderly friend, you must rejoice with me in having got past the time when sorrows of this sort could interfere with our enjoyment "*veteris Bacchi pinguisque ferinæ!*" Of course you do!

The dinner, however, came to an end, like other things; the *Fattore* and his son, after taking their coffee and one miniature glass of choice old brandy after it, returned to their inn, intending to start on their journey homeward, and get as far as Pelago that night; and Sebastian immediately afterwards took his

leave, having lingered a moment to invite Signor Giuseppe Palli, on the part of his uncle and his cousin Marietta, to come with his violin and have a little music on the following evening.

"My cousin will be much pleased, Signora, if you would accompany Signor Giuseppe, and accept our music as a substitute for all other entertainment," added the poor lover with downcast eyes, and blushing as he spoke at the falsehood he was uttering. For he full well knew how very far from welcome Laura's presence in the house was to Marietta.

Both invitations were graciously accepted—Laura remarking with her tongue that there was nothing in the way of music that she liked better, than to hear two such violinists as the *Canonico* and her father together, and feeling no sort of compunction as she said it; perhaps because she satisfied her conscience by adding a clause with her eyes, which brought the compound statement, thus made, somewhat nearer to the truth.

And then, Signora Giuditta having slipped away to see to the due disposal of the fragments of the feast, the jeweller and his daughter were left together for a few minutes before the former returned for his rarely omitted hour of evening attendance at the shop, or rather in the mysterious little sanctum—if a spot which had such small claims to sanctity in any way, may so be called—behind it.

"I was pleased to see thee and Nanni such good friends, my daughter!" said the old gentleman. "He is in truth a fine and well-grown youth, and his father has naught but good to say of him. Of course thou rememberest that he is thy uncle's only child, as thou art mine, Laura. And Carlo Palli, let me whisper in your

ear, is very comfortably well off;—very comfortably indeed!—more so than most folks may think. And all that will some day come to Nanni, joined, my child, to all that must some day" . . . . a sigh . . . . "some day come to thee, would place the family of Palli in such a position that thy children, my Laura, might take their places among the best in the land. A word is enough to the wise, and I think thou wert never of the foolish sort, my Laura. I was pleased, I say, to see so good an understanding between thee and thy cousin."

And therewith the money-lender walked off to his place in the middle of his web, to sit and watch for whatever flies might be taken in it; while Laura took out her drawing and modelling tools, and sate down to give as much of her mind to the work on which she was engaged as she could contrive to call off from wandering over every incident of the dinner, and ever returning to dwell and ponder on her father's parting words.

It was about nine on the following evening, after the jeweller had returned from his evening sitting in the spider's web on the Ponte, that Laura and he set forth to walk to the Palazzo Lunardi—his precious *viola* having been sent before by a trusty messenger.

The quartette parties, which made the delight of the old *Canonico's* existence, were almost invariably thus composed. The old man took the first violin. He was a consummate musician, and had once been a first-rate performer. Now the quartettes might have been better given if he had been content to hold the second place. But who would have hinted at deposing him? His dignity as first fiddle was not less dear to him than that of his position as head of

the House of Lunardi had been to his brother. The latter was cast down from his pride of place, but the good old Canon held his happily to the end. Happy are those whom facile pleasures and humble aims content. Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the better share of the kingdom of this world, as well as the entirety of that other kingdom promised to them.

The second violin was the province of Sebastiano; and however high might have been the appreciation of his performance by an exclusively musical critic, the most charming part of it to others would have been the assiduous and skilful care with which the young man waited upon the somewhat enfeebled execution of the old one, and was ever watchful to efface himself so far as might be necessary to avoid all risk of effacing the octogenarian performer.

The tenor fell to the lot of Signor Giuseppe Palli. It was the only relaxation which the careful and business-absorbed old gentleman allowed himself; and he was an excellent player. He always wore his double gold eye-glass on the high ridge of his long nose when playing; always sate with his long rigid person clad from head to foot in glossiest black, perfectly erect, and his narrow high grey head, with its prominent cheek-bones, pinched temples, and tall retreating forehead, thrown up; always beat time with the toe of one long narrow gold-buckled shoe; and was, it may be hoped at such moments, liberated for awhile from thoughts of foreclosures, bad debts, and twenty per cent. For many years he had been in the habit of taking the same part in the old Canon's quartette parties; and quartette players know the advantages and pleasures of being thoroughly ac-

quainted with and habituated to each other's play. The acquaintance had begun at the time when the Conte Rinaldo and his family had gone, at the period of their final downfall, to lodge in the house of the jeweller's then foreman, Simone Boccanera, and it had ripened into greater intimacy than would have been likely to have arisen but for this community of tastes and pleasures.

The violoncello was the share of the Canon Guido Guidi, and none of those who were well acquainted with his reverence would have doubted, however ignorant of music they might have been, that the handsome priest played well. Whatever Guido Guidi did, he did it well. As in the case of the money-lending jeweller, music was the one relaxation which he permitted himself, from the assiduous cares incidental to that course of life which he considered as, or chose to substitute for, the path of duty. The reader may have remarked the tone in which he spoke to Marietta of the objects to which his life was devoted, and the temper in which he applied the term "duty" to them. For the Reverend Guido Guidi was fully persuaded of the truth of the dogma he laid down to Marietta on the same occasion;—that whomsoever else it may be expedient to deceive, it is never expedient to deceive one's self.

The two Lunardi, the old Canon and his great nephew, may be said to have lived for music; it was to them not a relaxation, but a main object of existence;—in the case of the young man avowedly so. Yet it is probable that the two amateur players, so to distinguish them, were—not the most perfect musicians in their organization, but—the most tho-

rough masters of all that fingers can do with bow and catgut.

When the jeweller and his daughter reached the old Canon's third floor, they found Guidi and his violoncello already arrived. Marietta had done her utmost to make her one sitting-room into as neat and comfortable a little music-room as possible. In one corner was the stool used by Guidi, an old-fashioned church-looking reading-desk for his music, and his violoncello reposing with its long neck and little head in the corner. The old Canon was sitting in his accustomed arm-chair at the table in the middle of the room, with a huge pair of spectacles of tortoise-shell on, looking over a quantity of music, most of it in MS. And on this occasion the old gentleman was properly equipped in his straight-collared, single-breasted, somewhat threadbare, but most carefully brushed canon's coat, and looked a gentleman every inch of him.

It is a singularly subtle thing—that looking like a gentleman! There was Signore Giuseppe Palli;—the outward appearance of the man has been described. He had all those marks and characteristics of shape and formation which are held to give aristocratic appearance; even his features were cast, though not in a noble or love-attracting, yet in a dignified and somewhat imposing mould. Moreover, he had every advantage of habiliment that superior quality, cut, and condition could confer. And there was the old Canon, with his fat round-about figure, his kindly, mild, old rosy face, and his threadbare coat. And yet not only would any gentleman have felt that the old Canon was the gentleman of the two, but what is infinitely more curious, many a man

of the lower classes would have intuitively felt the same.

Sebastian was standing at the back of the Canon's chair, with one hand on his further shoulder, so that his arm encircled the old man's neck, while with the other he was assisting him in seeking what he was looking for among the music on the table. He was standing thus exactly opposite to the door as the jeweller and Laura entered, and a bright sunny beam of pleasure flashed from her eye as it fell upon the prettily composed picture of the octogenarian priest and his fondly attendant great-nephew. The ray shot into Sebastian's heart with an effect like that of a cordial. He understood to a nicety all the feelings that had gone to the generation of it, and responded to them before leaving the old man to greet the new comers by stooping his head till his bright blonde locks mingled with his uncle's long straggling silver tresses, and touching the bald crown of the old head with his lips, as much to say, "Is not he a dear old fellow! I see you can understand that I should be fond of him!"

Guidi and Marietta the while had been on the terrace, the window leading to which was standing open. They were leaning over the parapet in front, and conversing in low tones, as they looked down on the feebly-lighted city beneath them. As they heard the opening of the door of the room behind them, and the entrance of the guests, whose arrival they were awaiting, they turned and re-entered the sitting-room.

Guidi saluted the rich jeweller with a low bow, and a courteous smile, and then, turning to Laura, began to say something complimentary with reference

to her presence at their music. His manner was polished, easy, and graceful. But so are all the movements of a cobra capello; and they do not inspire confidence, trust, or liking for all that.

Marietta on her part was cold, distant, and lofty in her manner to Laura. It was impossible for her to be discourteous to her guest in her own house, if it had been Marietta's way to fail in courtesy to any one. But standing with her simple, sad-coloured, plain-made cotton dress, and wholly unadorned, though scrupulously neatly-arranged black head, flecked here and there with grey, before the beautiful girl, almost, but not quite, as tall as herself, and elegantly dressed, she somehow or other contrived to make Laura feel as if she were some very humble and insignificant little personage indeed, graciously permitted to approach the presence of royalty, but warned by never-ceasing emanations of "the majesty that doth hedge" a queen from ever forgetting for an instant the immeasurable distance which separated them from each other. Not many girls, knowing their own position and that of one thus treating them "*de haut en bas*" in this style, as well as Laura did, would have been inclined to tolerate so crushing a courtesy. But Marietta was Sebastian's cousin—stood almost in the place of his mother—and that was quite enough for Laura.

And then the welcome of the old Canon was of a very different kind. "What! Miss Laura! You are come to hear our catgut-scraping? This is really kind of you, my dear, and very flattering to an old fiddler half-way between eighty and ninety; for I know it is only to hear me that you have come. Sebastian here may think just what he likes about

it, but *I* know that it is the old man that you are come to hear. Well, we must do our best—we must do our best!"

While the old Canon was prattling thus, as Sebastian stood behind him, and Laura was stooping down to take his hand in front of him, they had a long and satisfactory conversation—with their eyes; but all that had passed between their tongues had been, "Good evening, Signora Laura. It is very kind of you to come to us;" and, "Many thanks, Signor Bastiano. I shall be delighted with your music. I promise myself a very pleasant evening."

"And what is it to be, Signor Canonico, to begin with?" said Guidi to the old man. "Suppose, before touching the new piece from the barbarian, we go over one of the old favourites?"

"With all my heart," replied the old man; "I can never be tired of my divine Boccherini—never. He is always to my old ears first and best. But the barbarian is a very fine fellow too."

"Quite true, sir!" returned Guidi; "the time will come when the name of the German will eclipse that of the Lucchese! But that is the way of the world. Beethoven—— Bah! What a name for a human being! How strange that those Germans should have music in their ears and their brains, and so little of it in their language! Beethoven will have his day, and be eclipsed in his turn!"

"I would rather forget that if I could, than dwell on it," said Sebastian.

"Better not to forget what *is*, my friend Sebastian, for the sake of imagining something which is not, in this matter as in others!" returned the younger priest.

"But my Boccherini will remain the father of the quatuor," said the Canon; "nobody can take that glory from him. The German, fine as he is, can only walk in his steps. So here goes for a quartette of the immortal Lucchese. See here, Signor Palli. Here is one of the earlier quatuors—one that was performed that memorable day at Lucca, when he had just returned from Rome. It was the first quartette I had ever heard—the first that any of the audience that day had heard! I shall never forget it, never! To think I should have outlived poor Boccherini!"

So the quartette was performed; and Marietta and Laura were the audience. And though the octogenarian leader dragged his time perhaps a little once or twice, and called forth from the magisterial-looking gold-spectacled tenor a monitory vibration high in air of his bow, together with a corresponding movement of his foot, strongly accentuated—if one may use such a metaphor—on the brick floor, yet, on the whole, the performance was highly satisfactory; and Marietta and Laura got up a little timid, feeble attempt at a clap at the conclusion.

"Ah!" said the old Canon, "it was well said, that if the Almighty wished for earthly music, he would choose the strains of Boccherini! For grand and soaring religious sentiment, I know nothing like him; and I sometimes think, that if the modern German master has found out the way to get somewhat more, perhaps, out of the fingers, he gets less out of the heart, than our sublime Lucchese!"

"As for that, most reverend sir," observed his fellow priest, the Canon of San Lorenzo, "music would be found, probably, to get out of any heart, as

you say, just what it finds there, ready to come out."

"They are great masters, first-class minds, both of them, sirs," said the jeweller, carefully wiping the strings of his instrument with a silk pocket-handkerchief as he spoke; "I won't say that either is superior to the other; but for my own part, I think I like the Italian best in his adagios, and the German in his allegros."

"Of course, old Boccherini is a favourite with me," said Guido, "because he has done so much for my own instrument. I think nobody has followed his practice of turning a quartette into a quintette by doubling the violoncello. Yet how admirably the idea has answered in his hands! What additional dignity and suavity at the same time he has obtained by it!"

"Admirable! delicious!" cried the old man; "but my boy there, Bastiano, is a heretic. He prefers the German. I suppose young folks always do, and always will, think all that's new better than all that's old."

"You know, uncle, that I love our Boccherini as well as you do," replied the young man; "but I confess I think that Beethoven fills out more completely all my notions of what music should be and express. My mind and ear seem to me to accompany Boccherini, but to strain after Beethoven. The one is a congenial friend with whose mind I am familiar, the other a mighty seer whose profounder meanings are not wholly within my mental grasp."

It is probable that neither of his fellow performers felt the force of the young composer's distinction, or fully comprehended his meaning. But Marietta

looked earnestly at him with her large, sad, meditative eyes, as he spoke ; and Laura made it appear to him utterly immaterial whether the whole musical world agreed or disagreed with him in his notions, by giving him an animated smile of intelligence, and a barely perceptible little double nod, which with the accompaniment of a slight lifting of her straight, long, dark eyebrow, very eloquently told him how cordially she agreed with him in his estimate. There was more than enough in that little interchange of feelings to send him to take his part in the quartette of the new German master, which the old canon was looking out among the heap of music on the table, with an *estro* of delighted inspiration.

And then the Beethoven quartette was performed ; and then Guido gave them one of Boccherini's sonatas on the violoncello ; and then they had another quartette ; and then Sebastian, at his uncle's request, very eloquently supported by a glance from Laura, performed a " Notturno " of his own composition, which was to be introduced into his opera. And then the ecclesiastically-clad servant-boy brought in an ancient brass tray, with half-a-dozen glasses of lemonade and a few little biscuits on it ; and each guest took his glass, and sipped with as much contentment as if it had been of the rarest juice of the rarest grape on earth. And the chat became general the while ; and Sebastian ventured to tell Laura that he had attempted to compose some words for his nocturn which he should wish to be permitted to bring to her for her criticism ; and then there was one more quartette before the guests departed ; and the old canon went off to his bed, declaring that he had never passed a pleasanter evening. Guido had walked

off with the jeweller and his daughter, so that, when the old man went to bed, Marietta and Sebastian were left together.

The latter stepped out through the open window on to the *loggia*, to enjoy the beauty of the night, and the May moon just rising over the black forest-covered ridge, under which Vallombrosa is nestled among the pine-woods.

Marietta after a few minutes followed him, and stepping noiselessly to his side, as he stood by one of the columns looking out dreamily into the night, laid her hand upon his shoulder before he was aware of her presence.

"Is it not a charming spot, this *loggia*, Marietta?" said he, as he turned round at the touch of her hand. "I would not change this '*terzo piano*' for any '*primo*' in the city, from which I could not see my favourite Vallombrosa hills!"

"I should have thought there was a better reason than that, Sebastian, for unwillingness to change this poor lodging for any other in Florence,—unless it were for an apartment in this palace more worthy of the master of it."

"Ah! pardon, cousin Marietta," returned he, "I was not thinking of the house in that point of view, or I would not have said anything to grate against your feelings on the subject. But you know, dear Marietta, that I am not the master of it, and never shall be."

"You were not thinking of the house in that point of view!" rejoined his cousin, in a voice more of sorrow than of anger; "and I, Sebastian, have never ceased thinking of it 'in that point of view,' as you phrase it, for the last twenty years. Night and day,

I think that these old walls, which shelter us, are the same that have sheltered our forefathers any time these five hundred years. Is there nothing sacred to you in this spot, Sebastiano, Conte de' Lunardi,—sacred beyond any other spot on all earth's surface?"

"I suppose I take less interest in the house than I might otherwise do, cousin Marietta," replied Sebastian, naïvely, "from knowing that it can never be anything to me. It is gone from us, my dear cousin; let us not think so persistently on the matter as to covet what belongs to another, and can never belong to us."

"You talk of what you know nothing about!" retorted Marietta. "But tell me, Sebastian," she added, suddenly, after a pause, "if by any strange vicissitude of fortune or fate, it were to come to pass,—anything, you know, may be imagined as a supposition,—if by any freak of fortune it were to happen that you were so far restored to the position of your ancestors as to be once again the possessor of these dear old walls,"—she seemed to multiply her words, as if she hesitated to come to the point on which her heart was fixed; but at length, proceeding with sudden directness and earnestness, added, "would you, in that case, still wish to blur the unstained escutcheon of our house by forming an alliance with the daughter of a plebeian money-lender? Answer me, Sebastian!"

"Dear Marietta!" said the young man, with compressed emotion, "how can I answer you truthfully without answering you painfully? And I would so fain return you only pleasure for all the care, all the kindness, all the love you have lavished on me, from my cradle upwards. You have been more than

mother and sister, combined in one. Dear, dear Marietta!" and he took her hand in both of his, as he spoke, and pressed it to his bosom.

"Yet let me have your reply to my question, and truly, be it painful or not," continued Marietta, with a touch of hardness in her manner.

"It seems unwise to me, my cousin, to go thus in search of sorrow gratuitously. I never can possess Palazzo Lunardi again, any more than I can bring back the time of the Crusaders, and again earn glory in the Holy Land. But since you will have a true answer to your bootless question, I say, that if all the blood of all the Lunardis that ever lived . . . . ."

"Stop! Sebastian!" cried his cousin, in a short sharp voice, as if suffering from sudden bodily pain; "stop! do not speak so of the race. It is blasphemy in my ears! I cannot hear it. Shape your protest otherwise, I pray you."

"Well, then, Marietta, I will say without any protest, simply that I neither should nor could consider any earthly rank, title, fortune, position, possessions, or nobility, could make me one quarter worthy of the love of her you speak of."

"I would fain, Sebastian, be more tender of your feelings than you have been of mine. Understand, then, that the principles of high and noble duty, which compel me to strive against you in this matter, have in nowise reference to the worth of the lady in question, or of her love in the sense in which you use the terms. Do you not see, my Sebastian, that in so speaking we are merely talking at cross purposes. Surely you must perceive that the most entire persuasion of her possessing every most peerless charm and virtue is perfectly compatible with recognition of

the fact that Laura Palli is, on grounds of quite a different order, not worthy to be your wife? Granted that she be all you think her,—and I have no wish even to imagine that she is not so,—would it be less true that you would by such an alliance blot the hitherto unblotted scutcheon, which it is your first and highest duty to transmit to your descendants stainless as your noble fathers have transmitted it to you?"

The moon sailing high over the Vallombrosan woods had by this time risen sufficiently to illumine the *loggia* and the figures of the two cousins standing in the front of it. The grand and commanding figure of Marietta might have been taken for that of an inspired Sibyl, as deeply moved by the earnestness of her appeal, her face became flushed, the expression of her eye intensified, and her delicately-formed, though not small, hand raised in air, with upward-pointing finger, as though her thought were that the trust she spoke of was confided to her keeping by Heaven itself. Sebastian listened to her words in silence, while his gaze wandered abstractedly far away over the distant hills, and an expression of pain, increasing as his cousin proceeded, settled on his face. He remained silent for awhile after she had ceased speaking, and walked to the other extremity of the *loggia* and back to her before replying.

"You say I am not tender of your feelings, my cousin!" he said at last; "yet God knows how often I have striven not to wound them. But how can I reply to you, my Marietta, without doing so? Too truly you say we are talking at cross purposes! How can it be otherwise? Our whole minds, alas! are too far sundered in this matter. I cannot bear to speak

out sentiments and thoughts which sound, as you have said, like blasphemy in your ears. But in truth, to my judgment, you are asking me to sacrifice my every chance of happiness not to the happiness of another, but to a vain and empty idea;—to offer it up on the altar of an idol in which I cannot believe. Can it be that a living heart is of so little, and the worship of a name, of which some day, Marietta, I or one of mine must be the sole bearers, of so great value?"

"Happiness!" exclaimed Marietta, pressing her two hands on her forehead as she spoke; "Happiness! What has one of us to do with happiness till our duty to our race be done! Say that you are called on to sacrifice happiness; has the duty been laid on your shoulders only? I was younger than you, Sebastian, when I too made the sacrifice! Do I preach what I have not practised? I too, Sebastian, could have talked of a living heart, and the value of it, once. I too was tempted by visions of happiness. It was my higher happiness to turn from them once and for ever! Was there no wrenching of heart-strings, think you, when I put away from me with unrelenting hand all that other women live for and die for! Living heart! Do you suppose that this heart is of stone? If you think it is so now, do you suppose it always was so? Was there no agony in the struggle, think you?—no hard fight to win over the pleadings of a girl's heart during the long night watches in yon chapel of our ancestors, where with my knees on the gravestone of Lunardo Lunardi I sought and found courage to deny myself, and live only for my duty towards the illustrious dead, whose blood is in my veins?"

"My poor Marietta!" said Sebastian, taking her hand, and looking with infinite pity into her eyes, softened now by the memories that had been recalled to her mind; "my poor Marietta! one noble heart, then, has been immolated on the altar already!"

"You know,—in part you know what my life has been, Sebastian!" she continued more calmly. "I have not had much in it of what is generally called happiness. But I have been faithful! For twenty years I have been faithful! Now at least the hours spent among the memorials of our race in that their resting-place are not hours of self-accusation or humiliation. The spirits of our forefathers, as they look down on me among their sepulchres, know that I have been true to their blood, and that when my bones shall be laid with theirs, the spirit of one true Lunardi will join the band of the illustrious dead!"

In the little church which has been spoken of as forming the boundary of the garden of the Palazzo, and which had been built by one of the family, there were a great number of the tombs and gravestones of past generations of the Lunardi, with two or three full-length statues, and several busts in the different costumes of the times in which they had lived, knights in armour, grave magistrates in doctoral caps and capes, and dignified citizens with the long gowns and hoods of the best ages of the old Republic. Among these, Marietta was wont to spend many an hour in prayer and meditation of the kind that may be easily imagined. And when she spoke, as above represented, to Sebastian of the spirits of the past generations of the Lunardi, or when similar thoughts were passing through her mind, the visions which really presented themselves to her imagination, as

the persons who were to approve of her conduct and welcome her, were the likenesses of those venerable old figures cut in stone, on which her eye had so often rested. Persons whose minds are less exclusively occupied with the things and thoughts of this visible world may find such a confusion of ideas, however lurking and latent in the mind, difficult to conceive. But these are tricks which an imagination wholly immured in matters, thoughts, and interests of the finite and temporal order, is apt to play.

It was Marietta's turn, as she ceased speaking, to seek the calm of a minute's silence; and she, as Sebastian had done a minute or two before, walked away from him to the further end of the *loggia*. Returning to him presently, she said, in a calmer tone,—

"Yes! my Sebastian; my life, too, has been a struggle, a long fight, sometimes a hard one. Shall it have been all in vain?"

And saying this, she placed her hands on his two shoulders, and kissing him on the forehead, turned to leave the *loggia* without waiting for any reply.

CHAPTER VIII.

MARIETTA'S NIGHT WALK.

MARIETTA went straight through the sitting-room to her little chamber behind it, which looked into the garden, stopping only to light a small brass hand-lamp from the tall classically-shaped Tuscan *lucerna* that stood burning on the table, as the quartette players had left it. But she did not go at once to bed. Unlocking a little cupboard in the wall near the head of the bed, above the small door of which a Madonna in ivory, of no vulgar execution, stood on its ornamental bracket against the wall, she took out her account books, and placed them, together with the lamp, on the little table. Then having closed the cupboard, she knelt before it, and before the image of the Virgin above. Of course, the act of worship was intended wholly for the latter. But Marietta's heart was so inextricably, so irrevocably bound up with the contents of the little receptacle thus placed immediately under the blessing and the protection of the Holy Virgin; the thoughts and hopes, that rarely strayed far away from that hoarded deposit, were so inseparably mixed up in her mind with every lofty sentiment of duty; and the objects connected with, and represented by it, were so sacred

in her eyes, so entirely deserving of the approbation and blessing of Heaven, that the reverent genuflection, and the earnest and impassioned supplication which followed it, would have been perceived by those, who know what heart-worship really means, to have been directed to the one fully as much as to the other object.

Yes! Marietta truly worshipped the idea and the aim represented by the account books stored away for now nearly twenty years in that little cupboard in the wall, and she verily worshipped no other thing or thought. She said truly that she lived only for that idea and aim. And she did so, not after the manner of those, who pursue indeed a life-object with equal eagerness, but who at the bottom of their hearts recognise the truth, that something else should be lived for, and who hope some day to live for that something else. No! Marietta could form no other wish or hope for her last hour on earth, than that she might be solaced in it, at least by the consciousness that she had faithfully expended the freshness of youth and the energy of mature age, ungrudging self-sacrifice, and untiring labour in the struggle, and at most by the blessed triumphant thought that her life-struggle had not been wholly ineffectual to the sacred object.

Not even the books of Giuseppe Palli, the money-lender, could have been kept with more orderly exactitude and business-like precision than those of Marietta, Contessa de' Lunardi; nor assuredly could the avaricious old money-getter have sat down to the examination of them with more gloating satisfaction. Indeed, it may be safely assumed that he had less of enjoyment in the task. *He* did not place the Virgin

over his iron safe! *He* did not kneel in prayer before turning to the figures that denoted the rolling up of his gains. His ideal was in truth but a poor one in comparison to that of the more visionary fanatic of the two. Assuredly one may feel much sympathy with the one, and none at all with the other counter up of interest and compound interest. Yet neither soul could have thus walled itself in with untransparent thickness of the finite, the temporary and the material, without passing through a process fatally drying and hardening.

Poor Marietta! . . . . And for the matter of that, why not "poor Giuseppe Palli!" too?

Marietta was soon deeply absorbed in her accounts, though she had only taken down the books to put the time to profit, while waiting for Sebastian to be quietly in bed. For her talk with him had left her in need of another strengthening inspiration, to which she intended to have recourse, before going to rest.

The tale told by the books was a very satisfactory one. There was the sum total of the hoardings of previous years accurately brought down to the end of the last—SCUDI FIORENTINI, 35,475. There was the accruing interest on this sum for the current year to be added, or at least for the first six months of it, now very nearly due; and there were the savings from the canon's income for the same period. These were a trifle less than they had been for the previous corresponding quarters. The old man had required some slight increased expenses for his comfort, and Marietta had permitted the outlay, abstaining from the purchase of a much needed dress for herself, in order, as far as might be, to meet it, without detri-

ment to the hoard. Still there was a small falling off. And had it not been that the great end seemed well nigh reached, Marietta would have severely schooled herself for the weakness of having permitted her affection for her uncle to interfere with the paramount claims of duty.

As it was, she only sighed as she noted the deficit, and said to herself, "Poor dear uncle Giacomo! He has done much, tho' ignorantly, for the cause. May it be counted to him in extenuation of his fatal apathy."

Being sure that by this time Sebastian was in bed and probably asleep, Marietta replaced her books in their cupboard, and carefully locking it with a small key that never left its place on the ring of slight gold chain around her neck, proceeded to the task, or rather the pleasure, for the enjoyment of which she had been waiting. This was simply a stroll through such parts of the palace as were open to her at that hour. It was a frequent practice with her to indulge in a progress of this sort through the passages and staircases of the building so sacred in her eyes, and the possession of which she coveted with so absorbing a passion. What was her object? What is the object of the miser whose treat it is to have out his bags of gold, and gaze on them? He cannot enjoy the excitement of counting up the contents. It has been too often done already, and the tale is too well known. But at least he may feast his eyes; he may ascertain that every loved piece is duly present; and Marietta's pleasure was akin to this.

I almost despair of enabling English readers to appreciate fully the feelings with which an Italian noble regards his ancestral palace in his native city,

and which, in such a case as that of Marietta, would naturally be intensified to a degree of fanatic passion little short of decided monomania. It would need an entire dissertation on the rise and progress of the medieval Italian municipalities, and of the habits of thought and passions generated by that history, to set the matter in its true light. One understands that a Cavendish may be proud of Chatsworth, that a Howard should feel keenly the glories of Arundel, or a Berkeley rejoice in the venerable pile which gives him his name. But the connection between the English owner and his house is far from being the same, and the affection with which the stones are regarded by him very far from as intense in kind, nor even altogether similar in character, to the feelings with which the Italian regards his ancestral *city* residence. The connection between the man and the building is not the same. If Chatsworth were burned to the ground to-morrow the social standing of the Dukes of Devonshire would remain what it was before the calamity. But to the apprehension of an Italian the destruction or the alienation of the palace, which is the outward and visible embodiment of himself and his family as a constituent part of the social system, is equivalent to a decree which abolishes him and his for ever. It is the dreadful sentence equivalent to the old curse, "His place shall know him no more."

When at Florence the palace of the Uberti was razed to the ground in the thirteenth century, as a punishment for treason to the Republic, the ground on which it had stood was deemed so accursed that, when thirty years later the *Palazzo della Signoria* was to be built, it was determined to construct it in

the irregular shape, to be seen to this day, rather than to make it regular by including within its foundations a part of the accursed space on which the family mansion of the Uberti had stood.

When at Forli, in the fifteenth century, the great family of the Orsi had outraged the high-handed and despotic Caterina Sforza by treason beyond all hope of pardon, the worst part of the punishment awarded to the aged head of the family by his enraged sovereign lady was, to be compelled to stand by and witness the demolition, stone by stone, of the family mansion, while the public executioner asked him from time to time "Do you mark well the spectacle, O Orso?" That the old man was finally put to death, after witnessing the destruction of his home, was felt by all parties concerned, either as principals or spectators, to be a comparatively poor and weak part of the lady's vengeance.

Such stories are illustrative of the feeling with which an Italian noble family's city home is regarded by themselves and their countrymen. It is more to them than a property; it is a symbol, an embodiment, and a record. It is all that his epaulettes are to a soldier, its flag to a regiment, his shield to a knight, his name on the roll to an attorney, her fair fame to a woman, his credit on change to a merchant. And it is more than any or all of these, because the memories attached to it comprehend all that is valued and reverenced in the past; and the hopes, of which it is the centre, comprise every aim and ambition for ourselves and those whom we love better than ourselves, in the future.

In all things, save the simple and primary wants and impulses of our nature, men feel, as they have

been taught and bred to feel, not only by those who have the immediate teaching of them, but by all the influences of the social system around them, and by the traditions and inherited idiosyncrasies of past generations of their ancestors. Italians feel this family-palazzo-worship more intensely than one of ourselves can well realise, notwithstanding all the words that have been expended in illustrating the sentiment; and Marietta was, from special education, special character, and special position, calculated to feel it with an intensity exceptional even among her own people.

So she set forth to enjoy her solitary tour of inspection of that fondly loved incarnation—or petrification rather—of all the Lunardi glories; those much venerated walls, the forcible divorce from which had been like the pressure of the life-drops from out the heart, and the glorious re-acquisition of which she so fondly trusted was near at hand. Taking the small hand-lamp in one hand, and a huge key from a nail in the wall of the passage outside her door in the other, she passed through the outer door of the apartment in the occupation of her uncle, and proceeded to the head of a small back stair in an angle of the garden front of the building. Descending this, which reached only to the level of the second door, she came to a door at the bottom of it, which opened on the terrace formed by the *loggia*, which, as has been described, ran along the side of the garden. But the big key was not needed to open this. It was only shut by a latch, and Marietta, setting down her lamp on the last step, passed out on to the terrace in the moonlight. She traversed the entire length of it, till she came at the further end to a

door in the wall of the church, which shut in the garden; and to this she applied the big key.

It gave entrance to a small sort of gallery, not larger than a box at a theatre, which occupied one side of the special Lunardi chapel, and was so placed as to command a view of the high altar at the other end of the church. And from this gallery a very narrow stair, contrived in a corner of the chapel, afforded the means of descent into the body of the church. A similar arrangement, intended to enable the members of a family to attend the functions of the church almost without quitting their own palace, and without appearing in public, is very common in cases where an old family mansion is in contact with a church, and especially when the latter is in any way, by right of foundation, benefaction, or otherwise, connected with the owners of the former.

On taking the apartments on the third floor, Marietta had made the old Canon request the key of this door of communication with the church from his landlord the Marchese Perini; and the favour had been granted without any difficulty. Neither the Marchese nor his lady wife cared much for frequenting churches; and when the latter did perform the duty of perfunctory attendance at a mass, she preferred to hear it where she could be seen of men, and of as many and as aristocratic men as possible. So she went on such occasions in all state to the "Santissima Annunziata," and had not the least inclination to avail herself of the opportunity of privately attending mass in an obscure little church in an unfashionable quarter of the town.

To Marietta the possession of this key was a source of much gratification. Even the delusive sense of

occupying the Lunardi gallery in the Lunardi chapel, at the ordinary services of the church, was something. But Marietta put the key to other and more precious uses. Often, at some hour when she was tolerably certain of finding the little church empty, would she steel away from her home, and enjoy an hour's prayerful meditation on the subjects nearest to her heart in the sacred presence of the ancient effigies of the family. Often, too, would she indulge in similar curiously mingled spiritual and mundane reveries in the night hours, when the silence aided the powers of imagination, and when the uncertain and ghostly moonlight favoured the feeling that she was, indeed, in the presence of those worthies of her race whose effigies were half life-like in the pale stone around her. It was her habit to seek strength and inspiration from such converse at times, when the path before her had seemed too steep, when her faith and courage had wavered, and she had felt that she needed the (at least, fancied) support of some kindred sympathy, some approving encouragement to proceed on the long and solitary way which stretched out between her and her far distant object.

That object was now nearer,—almost within her grasp it seemed; and though it might well be that she would yet need the support, under all and any difficulties that might yet arise in her path, it was not Marietta's intention to enter the church to-night. She could not refrain from opening the little, low door in the wall, however, and looking in to that last home and resting-place of those beloved and revered ones to whom she deemed herself to be so closely bound, and for whose sake she was content to labour so unremittingly. She paused in the little gallery for

a few moments, while her lips moved in the utterance of an unvoiced prayer; and then, crossing herself before again closing the door, she descended into the garden by a stair at the extremity of the *loggia*.

For there were objects of Marietta's worship in the little garden also. The statues and busts, and *bassi-rilievi* representing the *fasti* of the Lunardi history have been noticed in a former chapter. All these were objects of infinite care and love to this true daughter of their house; and it was a subject of constant anxiety to her to see that no carelessness or Vandalism of the stranger had suffered injury to reach them. She paused for a few seconds before each of these venerated memorials, lovingly removed a cobweb from one, and brushed away an accumulation of dust from another; and so passed through the unlocked door from the garden into the great hall on the ground floor. The modernisations and improvements which had been effected in different parts of the ancient building, were matters of infinite offence and disgust to Marietta; and not the less so that she was well aware that they would have the effect of raising the price which she would have to pay for putting the Lunardi in possession of their own again. In the great hall the old brick pavement, worn into inequalities by the feet of many a generation of the noble citizens of Florence, had been replaced by a smart new flooring of black and white squares of marble. Marietta scowled as she spurned the polished marble with her foot.

"But it is as well," she muttered to herself, "that the dear old bricks should not be profaned by traces of the incomings and outgoings of the pedlar's son! He prefers material which shows no traces of the

steps that pass over it. Well, again! No trace shall remain of the passage of him or his! He shall pass away, and the disgrace of his presence in the home of the Lunardi shall be as a hateful dream, to be forgotten in the light of the daytime so near at hand!"

The fine new glass door at the foot of the great staircase was an especial matter of disgust to the daughter of the old house. "The vulgar, ignorant upstarts!" she thought to herself, "how should they know the meaning or comprehend the sentiment of the free simplicity of the grand old life? A Lunardi might need to leave open way to a crowd of friends, dependents, clients, suitors. A Perini may need to shut it against a process-server! And is it not plain to see the hand of Heaven in the rapid ruin of the low-born intruder? Is it not Heaven's own doing which puts into my hands the opportunity of righting all that has been so foully wrong? Not in vain did my pious forefathers build yonder church which bears their name; nor in vain have my knees worn the stones which they laid at the altar's foot."

There remained in the hall four or five full-length portraits of members of the Lunardi race, and two huge, carved walnut-wood escutcheons, painted with their arms and device. And it had been a terrible dread, ever haunting Marietta, that the new proprietor would remove these in the course of his improvements. But they made part of the panneling and ornamentation of the hall, and it would have been necessary, had they been removed, to rearrange the entire partition and lining of the walls. The considerable expense which this would have entailed had probably been the means of saving them, as well as the ceiling of cross-beams, with the

Lunardi arms painted in the panel, which formed the roof of the hall. And Marietta satisfied herself yet once again that all these objects were duly in their ancient places; and pleased herself with the thought that the danger was nearly over now, and little likely to befal. Sadly, but calmly and with open brow and clear, unclouded eye, Marietta paused awhile before each of the old pictures, gazing up into the well-known features by the moon-light streaming in through the windows of the hall, as if enjoying the consciousness that she had the right to stand before them as a true Lunardi, faithful through all to her duty towards them and their race.

The odious new glass doors at the foot of the staircase were shut and locked, so that Marietta could extend her progress of inspection no further; and after slowly and thoughtfully pacing up and down the hall in the moonlight, three or four times, she proceeded to retrace her steps, and returned to her humble room on the third floor by the same route by which she had descended.

"The day of restitution is near!" she murmured to herself. "Would it were come! Would to God that that dear old man were worthy and capable of sharing in the triumph and the joy! Would, ah! would that he were! But my noble father's spirit will be present with me that day. And when the next line in the old register to that which chronicles thy death, my father, shall record the repurchase of the Palazzo by 'Marietta, Contessa de' Lunardi, daughter of the above,' thou wilt smile on thy child, and confess that thy teaching of twenty years was not thrown away on a wholly barren soil!"

As with these thoughts working in her brain,

Marietta passed by the little door of communication with the church, the wind slightly moved it, and called her attention to the fact that on coming out of the church she had omitted to lock it. She now did so, not thinking that it mattered much whether it were locked or not, as the church itself was empty and locked up; but merely because the custom was that it should be locked; and having done this, she took her lamp from the step where she had left it, and climbing to the humble apartment on the third floor, regained her chamber.

She was proceeding to undress herself to go to bed, when her eye was caught by a sheet of paper covered with figures on the floor. She took it up, and found that it was a kind of abstract or recapitulation in her own handwriting of the results of the long series of accounts in her ledger. It showed the net amount which had been saved in each year, the accruing interest, and the grand total of her wealth. She had drawn it up a day or two ago for her own satisfaction, and had left the sheet loose in her account-book, from which it had evidently fallen without her having noticed it, when she had been engaged with her accounts before leaving her room. She thought how fortunate it was that she had observed it, as the leaving it lying about there *might* have ruined all the plans for which she had so long striven; and a flush came over her as the idea passed through her mind. She determined not to run any such risk for the future; and, blaming herself for having thus wantonly repeated on a loose sheet a secret which was sufficiently and more safely recorded in her account books, at once destroyed the truant paper.

But as she was in the act of doing this, it suddenly flashed across her mind that she had left the door of her room shut, and that she had found it open on her returning. She stopped short in what she was doing, and reflected. Yes! she was certain, —she thought she could be quite certain—that she had closed her door. Was it possible that any human being could have been there since she had left it? Her first impulse was to ascertain if Sebastian was in his bed and sleeping. And she turned to go to his room to make sure of this. But a second thought upbraided her for having supposed for an instant that Sebastian could have acted the part of a secret spy on her actions. Had he chanced to discover her absence from her chamber at that hour, he would most unquestionably have waited her return. It was yet more impossible to suppose that her uncle should have left his bed, found her away from her room, and then quietly returned to his own. And as for the little chorister servant boy, he did not sleep under their roof. After reflecting on all these points, Marietta came to the conclusion that she must have shut the door imperfectly, and that the wind had blown it open. And fain to content herself with this explanation, she completed the destruction of the tell-tale loose leaf, and at length went to her bed.

CHAPTER IX.

LAURA AND CATERINA.

A FEW days after the quartette party at the Canon's apartment, Laura set forth a little after noon to pay a visit to her friend Caterina Boccanera. She had completed the design on which she had been engaged on that morning, to the entire satisfaction of Signor Simone Boccanera, and of her father, who, however, did not pretend to be any great judge of such matters. Master Simon, the junior partner, *was* a very competent judge, and a somewhat difficult one to please. On this occasion he had signified his perfect contentment; and in truth the ornament, as imagined by Laura's ingenuity and taste, was a pretty thing. Master Simon expressed his approbation mainly by a demand for more of the same quality. But Laura insisted that her father should pay her for her work by forthwith putting in execution a little plan she had been bent on for some weeks past. And Giuseppe Palli, who rarely made any very obstinate resistance to her wishes, and who, moreover, was by no means averse to his share in Laura's scheme, had consented to her demands.

The jeweller possessed a small *podere*,* with a

* Tuscan for a farm, or small estate.

very prettily situated villa on it, near La Lastra, some two or three miles from Florence, up the hill towards Bologna. The old gentleman's theory with respect to this possession was, that he went out there to enjoy a little country air and exercise every Sunday and saint's day, and also spent there two months of *villeggiatura* in the season of the great heats. But his practice was hardly ever to go near the place. Where the heart is . . . . We know! And Giuseppe Palli's heart was unquestionably in the little back den behind the shop on the Ponte Vecchio.

Yet the villa at La Lastra was a very charming spot. It was at a considerable distance from the high road to Bologna, on the left hand of one quitting Florence; and it stood on a jutting prominence of the flank of the Apennine, so as to command a view of the Valdarno both upwards towards the Chianti hills, and downwards as far as the mountains behind Pistoia.

Now Laura was bent on a little party at the villa; —a nice little dinner—music, moonlight rambling in the garden, and flirtation afterwards;—a very pretty programme, it will be admitted. Of course I shall not be misunderstood to mean that our Laura, a very excellent young woman, and a heroine into the bargain, was guilty of misprision of flirting, plotting it in cold blood as cynically as I have stated it. We all know that well brought up young ladies never, never could be guilty of such a thing; and of course Laura would lose caste if I admitted it on her behalf. Let it be clearly understood therefore that I do not admit anything of the kind. Perhaps I may venture to say that she thought that "the amusements of the evening might be varied by pleasing conversation."

The guests were to be, firstly, the members of the quartette party. There was some little difficulty about the old Canon. For carriages could approach the villa no nearer than the nearest point of the Bologna road, and that left a good half mile to walk. But that was not farther than the Canon walked every day in Florence. The old man himself had protested that he did not in the least fear the walk, and that he should enjoy the party above all things. Some difficulty also had been experienced with Marietta. It was not that she at all disliked Laura personally; but she felt that evil might arise, and no good could come from intimacy between her family and that of the jeweller. She wished to discourage all such foregatherings as much as she could. But what could she do? It was better on the whole, that she should be there to see what took place, than that the evil should grow up and increase unchecked by her eye and influence. So Marietta had finally consented to be of the party.

Nanni Palli was also to be there. His uncle in consenting to the party had made a point of not fixing the day until they should know when his nephew, Nanni, could be in Florence. And as it happened this condition did not cause any difficulty. For the jeweller got the next day a letter from his brother telling him that Nanni would be in town in a day or two, bringing with him the deeds for the new mortgage, which as his brother would observe, had been drawn in exact conformity with his directions.

Besides these persons, with all of whom the reader is more or less acquainted, Laura had determined on asking her father's partner, and his family. That

noun of multitude in this case comprised only two individuals besides the working jeweller himself;—his daughter Caterina, and his son Alessandro, better known as Sandro, and best of all as the "*Gobbo*" Boccanera. There was no other member of the Boccanera family, for he, like his senior partner, had been a widower for many years.

Simone Boccanera belonged to a type of idiosyncrasy much less rare among the Italians than among our more diffident, more doubting, and less self-contented selves. He had the happiness of having raised his occupation into a passion, unless indeed it is to be supposed that he had succeeded in turning a passion into an occupation. He was well convinced that art was the first and highest scope of a human being; and doubted not that his own was the highest branch of art. He was an ardent admirer of the past, but from an exclusively artistic point of view. He had carefully preserved the notices and authorities that showed his descent from noble ancestors; and was pleased to have the great painted escutcheon which nearly covered one wall of his little sitting-room. But he considered that his art was calculated rather to give lustre to his name than *vice versâ*; and the only pedigree which he would really have greatly prized would have been one which should have given him one of Vasari's worthies for an ancestor. He was withal a queer mannered, awkward, silent man, perfectly inoffensive, incorruptibly honest, and not altogether devoid of that perception of humour which is one of the special characteristics of the Tuscan people, as contradistinguished from the other races of Italy.

Caterina was, as Laura had said of her, one of the

prettiest, and one of the best girls in Florence. She was small in person, lithe, elastic, and active as a mountain goat in her movements, and her type of face was essentially Tuscan, forehead broad, though not very high, jaw and chin narrow, and the latter a little protruding, and the entire form of the face rather triangular than oval; but brilliant large black eyes, very abundant dark brown tresses, a well defined black eyebrow beautifully pencilled, a perfectly and purely white but not transparent complexion, and irreproachably beautiful teeth, sufficed to impart a very considerable share of beauty of the *piquant* sort to this little face. The eye, large, well-opened, and lustrous as it was, did not at all resemble the somewhat heavy, voluptuous, but ever and anon passion-lighted eye of the Roman woman. There was more of intellect in it. It was alive with vivacity, animation, and *espièglerie*, rarely with passion. There was an infinity of French *malice* in the expression of the entire face, but not a shadow of English malice. And altogether the little person who hung it out as the ensign of what was to be found within, was one quite as likely to become the object of a *grande passion* as many a mistress of greater pretensions to the more classical forms of perfect beauty. As for her moral and intellectual qualifications they were merely the reflex of those of her brother, and will be best understood from an understanding of his character.

The Gobbo Boccanera was rather a peculiar personage; and the special turn of mind which made him so was more peculiar and uncommon in those days in Italy than at the present time. He had imbibed enough of the French ideas, which had only

recently ceased to be the entirely dominant ones in Italy, to be a radical in state, and a free-thinker in church matters; and yet was so close a student of his country's history, and so enthusiastic a lover of her ancient glories, that the French occupation had been gall and wormwood to him, and he cordially hated the people, which had furnished the ideas and doctrines on which his own mind and opinions had been formed. He hated the priests too, making, however, a notable exception in favour of his reverence "*Il Signor Canonico Giacomo dei Conti di Lunardi*," in consideration firstly of the noble old Florentine blood which flowed in his veins; secondly for the sake of Auld Lang Syne, when the late Conte lodged with his father in the days when the latter was but a working foreman, and when the good Canon had been a frequent visitor there, ever kindly and good-natured, and ever ready to impart any instruction he could to the young ones of the family, a kindness which the *Gobbo* very particularly appreciated; and thirdly because good old Canon Giacomo was one of those happy men who carry about with them a passport with a very notable and detailed *signalement*, backed by Nature's own hand and seal, and "inviting and requiring" all men, women, and children whatsoever to admit him at once into their hearts, and accord him their special love and affection. No human being *could* hate Canon Giacomo. So the *Gobbo* derogated from his principles in that special case. But he made up for it by an intensified dislike of that other Canon, the Reverend Guido Guidi, of the chapter of San Lorenzo.

In outward appearance the *Gobbo*, poor fellow, was . . . . a *Gobbo*; and what more can be said!

His face, however, was not *gobbo;* and had it been placed on other shoulders, it was one which a woman, ay, or a man either, would have been likely to look at a second time. It was his sister's face exaggerated. The forehead was broader and more massive, the jaw and chin sharper, the eye yet larger and more full of intellect, the eyebrow heavier, bushier, and, if possible, blacker. It was, with all that, not a face devoid of beauty; and if Sandro Boccanera had belonged to that country, wherever it may be, in which the stature of men is measured from the bridge of the nose upwards, he would have been deemed a remarkable man.

These were the members of the family, whom Laura set off to visit at an hour when she was sure of finding them all at home; and we already know that the object of her visit was to invite them to the projected festival at the villa.

Italians of all classes are, in consequence of some difference or other between their social system and ours, altogether devoid of that feeling which, among English people, causes both high and low to be disagreeably conscious of a certain sense of restraint in the presence of their superiors or inferiors;—the social superiors being often quite as uncomfortably impressed by it as the inferiors. Propose to an Italian man or woman, boy or girl, any party of pleasure, and their glad acceptance of it is checked by no fear of the probable presence of greater and grander folks than themselves, and by no forecasting misgivings as to their inability to appear in raiment as shining and with circumstances as imposing as the latter. Still less would they be tormented with any doubts as to their own proficiency in all the small

matters which go to make up the manners and bearing of the polite world. "We are educated people! Are we not Tuscans?" would be the thought which, if unexpressed, would be found at the bottom of their notions on the subject. And the "education" which the thought would refer to would be found to be comprised in the simple persuasion of the fact that when people meet together for social purposes it is the place and duty of everybody to say and do all they can to make themselves agreeable, and give pleasure to those around them,—to look hard at all that their neighbours wish to be seen, and obstinately shut their eyes to all that they would wish to be concealed;—to tread on no corns, and to flatter every man or woman's special vanity as far as they know it;—never to speak of a cord within a mile of a man whose great uncle's third cousin was hung;—and to accept all tributes to their own vanities and self-loves trustfully, gratefully, and unquestioningly.

And sad it is to say, my moralising friend, that the desperate wickedness of the human heart, and the fallen condition of our nature are such, that the observance of such maxims does absolutely produce a very agreeable sort of society;—more agreeable often, it is to be feared, than certain higher-toned ideas and loftier qualities succeed in achieving!

The invitation accordingly, of which Laura was the bearer, was accepted by the Boccanera family with gladness. Old Master Simon declared that it would be just the opportunity he wanted to look for the leaves and sprigs of a certain wild shrub of the heath kind, which he had been thinking would furnish the idea for a new and admirable setting for a brooch;—and he should have an opportunity of con-

sulting the Signora Laura about it on the spot. The *Gobbo* promised himself, at any rate, a first-rate musical treat, perhaps the valued privilege of a little talk with La Signora Marietta on the subjects so dear to both of them; and, possibly, an opportunity of playing, either by word or deed, some malicious trick at the expense of the Reverend Guido Guidi.

As for Caterina, her eyes sparkled in her head, as she said, "One never sees you, Signora Laura, without being sure to hear something agreeable. I do so love a day in the country,—and then at the Signor Padrone's villa! It will be delightful!"

But Caterina did not know yet the whole interest attaching to the proposed festival, and when Laura, putting her arm round her waist, whispered, "Come with me into your bed-room, *Caterina mia!* I want to have a talk with you;" she wondered much what the business in hand could be.

The two girls went off together; the queenly Laura, a head taller than her companion, like a delicate and graceful Italian greyhound beside a pretty little, playful, bright-eyed King Charles spaniel. When they had reached the safe retreat of Caterina's little chamber, and were standing, still with arms encircling each others' waists, at the foot of the bed,—which was the same thing as standing at the little window,—Laura said, "I have not told you all the party that are to be at the villa, *Caterina mia!*"

"Who else?" replied Caterina. "What matters? It is sure to be charming. There is only one of those you did mention whom, between you and me, Signora Laura, I don't much like, and that is *Il Reverend-*

issimo Signor Canonico Guidi. Sandro cannot endure him !"

" No more can I, my friend, between you and me. But I must endure him, and so must Signor Sandro, for the nonce. He is our tenor, you know, and we must all admit that his *viola* is very endurable. But it was not about any Canonico that I wanted to speak to you. I don't suppose that one or two, more or less, of *them* would make much difference to you."

" To be sure not ! or anybody else either, as long as those are there, whom you *did* mention. But who is it that you wanted to tell me of,—me, specially more than the others there ?" said Caterina, with some rising curiosity.

" Well ! if there is *nobody* that would make any difference to you," rejoined Laura, withdrawing her arm from the other's waist, and placing a hand on each of her shoulders, as she looked smilingly but piercingly into her eyes ; " there is certainly no need to tell you anything about anybody. But I *did* fancy that away over the Consuma yonder——"

Here Caterina's eyes dropped before her companion's scrutiny, and the blood rushed up all over her pale forehead and among the roots of her black hair.

" Ah, yes ! I thought there *was* somebody," continued Laura ; " well, he is to be one of the party at the villa."

" But you have not yet told me whom you mean, Signora Laura," said little Caterina, making an effort to recover her composure and keep her secret.

" In the first place," rejoined Laura, pushing her advantage, " I won't be called ' Signora,' and in the

second place, *carina*, I won't tolerate such transparent hypocrisy. Whom can I mean? There are so many men on the other side of the Consuma mountain, are there not? Now, Caterina, you must come to confession, for I came here to-day that we two may have no secrets between us."

"But, Signora——"

"No! I told you I won't be called so."

"Well! what must I say then?" asked Caterina, taking one of Laura's hands in both of her's, and stooping her head to lay her cheek on it, "Tell me what I am to say, and you shall be obeyed."

"Say, Laura, to be sure; and if you are very good, and you think I deserve it, you might say, dear Laura!" returned the other.

"That, at all events, comes easy," said Caterina; "Dear Laura! you are——"

"That is right! And now, dear Caterina, go on with what you were going to say about him on the other side of the Consuma."

"But, *davvero, davvero*,* Sign——!—I mean, Laura, dear,—I was not going to say anything about him!"

"*Brava, la Caterinuccia!* At all events, we have got so far as to admit a definite 'him' as the only 'him' on the other side of the Consuma that you and I can have to speak of. And having reached that point, if you won't speak about him, I suppose I must."

"But what more can there be to be said, dear Laura, when you have told me that he is to be at the villa," pleaded Caterina, who began to have considerable fears that something disagreeable was behind.

* Truly, truly.

"There is much more to be said, Caterina, which, it seems to me, might be said with advantage to both of us, if you would be as frank and confiding as I wish to be."

Now this was hardly fair in our dear and peerless Laura; for the confidence she was asking was the confession of an unavowed love, and the confidence she was disposed to give in return was the avowal that she was, as regarded the gentleman in question, entirely fancy free. And it will be felt that this was not an equal bargain. She had strong reason to believe, however, that the avowal she had to make would be, if not so difficult in the making as that she wished to extract from her friend, yet fully as valuable to her as any confidence the latter could repose in her could be to herself. So she pushed on her attack.

"Come, now!" she continued, "I am quite sure that my cousin Nanni has been very thoroughly captivated by the pair of eyes that I am now looking into;—and small blame to him!"

"Oh! Laura, how can you say so? I am sure I have no reason to think—"

"No lies! Caterina dear! It is to be full confidence between us, you know!" interrupted Laura.

"Well! that is, I mean to say,—and it is true, if it was to be the last word I should ever speak, Laura,—Signor Nanni never said any word to me that could give me any right to think——that he thought——anything in particular."

"But suppose that I had happened to know that he did think something very particular; what then?"

"Why, then, *carissima Signora mia*," answered

Caterina, with a little touch of rebellious resentment, at having the secret, scarcely confessed by herself to her own heart, forced up from its depths in this manner, "in that case, unless Signor Nanni sent you here with a commission to speak in his name, I think it would be better to say nothing about any such guesses as to his sentiments."

"Nay, now that is naughty of you, my Caterina! You are angry with me! Silly one, am I not striving for your good?"

"If you mean, Signora Laura, that you are kindly warning me not to long for grapes which hang out of my reach, I must beg you to believe that the warning, however kindly meant, is not needed!"

"There! we have got back to Signora again; and you are positively in a passion, Caterina! Why, what a little spitfire you are! No, Signora, it was not by any such warning that I sought to do you service. But why will you not speak on the matter, *Caterina mia*, as if we had but one interest and one mind on the subject?"

"Precisely because we necessarily have two, *Signora mia!*" said Caterina, driven to stand at bay. "I also happen to know where Signor Nanni's homage is due. No doubt it is duly paid there, with the full approbation of the lady and the lady's family."

"But, supposing once again—if you are not in too furious a state of mind to suppose anything—that this homage was in truth duly paid, but was paid very much against the grain by the cavalier, and very much to the annoyance of the lady? What then, *Caterina mia?*"

"Why on earth should it be paid at all then?" asked Caterina, beginning to be rather mystified.

"Why, you simpleton, for the reason you have already mentioned yourself—the approbation of the respective fathers on both sides. Now do you see the whole of the matter, you very peppery and unreasonable little lady?"

Caterina did now begin to see "the whole of the matter," and various new lights and new thoughts flashed in upon her in consequence; but she was rather at a loss what to say to her friend in reply to her question.

"But, Laura dear," she said at last, again taking her friend's hand in both her's as before, "it is my turn to say now, 'What then?'"

"Well, I am glad we have got back again to 'Laura dear,' in the first place. Upon that footing we may examine the matter a little further," said Laura, stooping to give her friend a kiss on the forehead. "You see, my little Kate, the state of the case is simply this. Nanni's father and mine have thought naturally enough that it would be a very convenient thing to keep the family property together by making a match between the only son of the one, and the only daughter of the other. And nothing would be better if only Nanni and I could see our happiness in such an union. But we neither of us do. Nanni, poor fellow, comes doing the suitor to me in obedience to his father; but it is very easy to see that his heart is not in the work. As I have said already, it is elsewhere, Caterina; and if you were as honest with me as I am with you, you would admit that you know very well where it is to be found."

"But again I say, dearest Laura, even if I were to admit that I might possibly make some guess as to

its whereabouts, what then?" asked poor Caterina, rather piteously.

"What then? Why that's the question, Caterina. I do not intend to marry my cousin. Between you and me—quite between you and me for the present, you understand, *Caterina mia*—you may depend on it that such a marriage will never take place. I have ideas of my own, my friend, on one's duty in such matters; and I do not hold it to be my duty to marry a man whom I do not love, and who himself loves another."

"But, dearest Laura, you make little ado to settle it all your own way. But as to this loving another? Truly, honestly, in all confidence, Laura dear, I have no reason—hardly any reason to suppose that Signor Nanni ever thought seriously of me!"

"Hardly any reason! Well, you have some reason—eh, Caterina? But you see poor Nanni has been in difficulty. He would fain have given you more reason, but his orders, and I dare say his own interest too, as he understands it, were to woo me. And the little reason that you admit he has given you to think that he likes you has come from his inclination getting for a moment the better of his prudence. I see it all clearly, trust me."

"But still, even if you were quite right, Laura, I stick to my 'What then?' You may be determined not to have him. And even that seems to me a bold determination. But you cannot expect me to determine to have him—even if he were ever to ask me."

"Well! supposing such a case," replied Laura, while all trace of levity and archness left her face, and her eyes assumed the grave concentration of

expression they so often wore; "supposing such a thing, I think I should expect you to come to that determination, and act on it."

"You frighten me, Laura, with your words and with your looks! For the love of heaven, think of your father! He is a good man, but very stern, and accustomed to do his own will! Think of Signor Carlo, the *Fattore!* And think of poor little me! What am I? I have noble blood in my veins, but not a penny in my purse! If it were the Signora Marietta I had to deal with, that might count for something; but with your father——"

"With my father and with his brother that would weigh but little!" interrupted Laura, who, though wholly without any prejudices of her own on the subject, yet felt a little stroked the wrong way by her friend's very innocently intended remark; "with them, and perhaps with some others, even of those who shone most largely in the advantage, I am afraid the noble blood would not avail much. I fear me the article was too much discredited by its failure to save a Bourbon king from the scaffold. Yet it may be, *Caterina mia,*" she continued, drawing herself up to her full height, and poising her exquisite little head proudly on her slender neck, while a slight flush came over her cheeks, "it may be that there is a kind of noble blood which might avail to decide the question. But let us understand one another. Do you mean to say that you should shrink from accepting my cousin's hand, were he to offer it to you, from a sense of duty, or from a fear of others? You were speaking but now, I think, of your noble blood!"

Caterina looked up at her friend, with genuine

alarm in her countenance. The last allusion of Laura mystified her. She did not at all comprehend what she meant. And she was not accustomed to render a precise and accurate account of her motives such as that she was now called upon to furnish at a minute's notice, even to herself, and still less to another; and least of all on such a subject.

"Mean to say!" she stammered, looking up piteously into her friend's face; "you scare me, Laura. I did not mean to say anything!"

"But, Katie dear, the first thing necessary is to mean something, and to know your meaning yourself. If my cousin Nanni were to propose to you to marry him to-morrow, what should you say to him?"

"I should be horribly frightened, Laura!"

"Should you say to him, I can listen to no such proposals, because I am convinced that your father would not approve of them, and it is my duty to conform myself to his will in the matter."

"Perhaps that is what I ought to say, Laura!" sighed poor Caterina.

"If you think so, so you should do," returned Laura; "there can be no doubt about that. I for my part do not think so. When one considers what is the kind of interest my uncle Carlo could have in the matter of his son's marriage, and what is the kind of interest he himself and she whom he marries would have in it, it seems very clear to me that the wishes of the people to be married, and not those of anybody else, should decide the matter."

"I declare that seems true, and plain too, when you come to think of it so. But I never had thought of it," returned Caterina.

"*I* think," said Laura, with an air of solemn

mystery, as if she were the adept of a secret sect indoctrinating a novice with some new and awfully heretical truth, "*I* think that it is wrong—not right for any girl, or any man, to be commanded, or persuaded, or threatened, or frightened into marrying anybody against their own personal feelings and wishes. I think it so wrong, that nothing should ever induce me to such compliance. And Caterina," she continued, drawing closer to her, and dropping her voice to the solemn whisper befitting the communication of a new and strange heresy of the most tremendous kind, "I believe that half the misery and wickedness in the world comes from people marrying one another for other reasons than love."

"Laura!" cried Caterina, opening her large eyes to their utmost extent, and evidently quite overwhelmed by the strangeness of these notions, and by the largeness of the new view of life of which they gave her a vague glimpse. "But if nobody thought about . . . . . if there were no . . . . . I mean if everybody married everybody . . . . ."

"Stop a minute, Caterina," cried Laura; "I did not say that everybody ought to marry those they love, but that nobody ought to marry those they do not love."

There was a silence of a few minutes between the two girls after this tremendous profession of faith; till at length Caterina, still speaking in an awed tone beneath her breath, asked timidly,—

"How came you to think such things as these, Laura? How was it that you found out so much that other girls never dream of?"

"I'll tell you, Caterina," returned the jeweller's daughter. "I have read and thought about these

matters a good deal. I was not convent-bred, to begin with, you know! My father was a good deal in France, when he was young, and he hates convents and nuns and friars. Then he always let me, and indeed wished me to read many books, such as our Italian girls never see; and I have read many. And where do you think I got several which gave me my principal ideas on these matters?"

"Are there books about such subjects?" asked Caterina, naïvely; "and where did you get them?"

"They were lent me by your brother, Sandro! You know he and I were always great friends."

"I know you have always been very kind to him, as to all of us, Signora Laura,—*cara Laura*, I mean," she added, laughing, as Laura held up a reproving fore-finger,—"and I know that Sandro has a quantity of books, French most of them, which he is always reading; but I little thought they were about marriage. What can he want with books about marrying, poor fellow!"

"Perhaps there are other things in the books that interest him more. Signor Sandro has read and studied a great many things, I can tell you! But now, *cara mia*, let us think of our own affairs. I have told you my own way of thinking on some matters, which I never told to any other human being yet; but I do not feel at all sure that it will turn out that my uncle Palli would wish to thwart Nanni's inclinations in such a matter."

"But all this time, *Laura mia*, you are forgetting that I do not at all pretend to know what his inclinations are!" said Caterina, hanging her head.

"I think I see clearer than you do in the matter, my friend. Lookers-on, you know they say, see most

of the game. My notion is, that if Nanni were set free from all thought of the necessity of making up a match with me, you would soon see clearly too."

"But have you ever told Signor Nanni . . . . . as much as you have been telling me."

"No! I have never had any opportunity of doing so. He has never said anything to me which would call for such an answer. But Nanni is as good and true-hearted a fellow as ever breathed. We have always been excellent friends. And I have almost made up my mind to take him for a third in just such a consultation as we have been having now."

"Laura! what are you dreaming of?" cried poor little Caterina, in great alarm; "for the love of all the saints don't say a word to Signor Nanni,—at least not about me. I told you truly that he had never given me any right to imagine that he had ever a serious thought about me! Now promise me, Laura, that you won't . . . ."

"I promise you, most faithfully, my dear, that I will say no word and hint no hint that could by any possibility compromise you in any way. *Che! diamine!* * Be quite at rest on that point. And now perhaps you will admit that the other member of our party at the villa might interest you sufficiently to make it worth while to tell you that he is to be there!"

"*Davvero, davvero, Laura mia,* you have put so many new and strange thoughts into my head, that it seems to be all whirling round; and I feel very glad to have a little time to think before the day of the party comes."

* A common Tuscan exclamation, difficult to render. "What! could you think it!" is only near the mark.

"Well! dear Caterina, *do* think! And, meantime, be quite sure that I should as soon bite my tongue off as say a word which you would not wish said to Nanni. What I wanted chiefly was to be sure that if he came here to woo there would be a fair prospect of success for him. And that, Caterina, I have ascertained," added Laura, with a sly laugh in her eye, as she looked in her companion's face from under her eyelashes.

"I am sure I have said nothing, Laura, to give you any such certainty," rejoined Caterina.

"Oh, no! nothing at all. Nevertheless, I have picked up the certainty somehow. And now, *levo l' incommodo,* Signora.* We will meet again before our great day comes, to settle about our order of going."

"Good-bye! dear Laura; you are very kind and very good to your poor little friend. I always knew that; but now I feel as if I were in a maze, out of which you alone can help me."

"We will try to find the clue to it! Good-bye, Caterina!"

And so the two girls parted, and Laura hastened home to be in readiness, and see that all else was in readiness for her father's dinner-table when he returned from the shop at his usual hour.

* A Tuscan phrase used by a visitor concluding his visit. Literally, "I remove the inconvenience." It would hardly, now-a-days, be used "in good society," unless jestingly.

CHAPTER X.

THE PARTY AT "SCHIFANOIA."

THE projected party at Signor Giuseppe Palli's villa at La Lastra had been finally fixed to come off on a Sunday about ten days after the conversation which has been recorded in the last chapter. It was one of the last days of May, and the weather was all that could be wished, just hot enough to make night in the open air delicious, but not so hot as to have destroyed the greenery of the country, or to make an afternoon drive up the hill by which the road climbs out of the Valdarno to commence its way across the Apennines to Bologna intolerable.

It had been arranged that all the party should assemble at Signor Palli's house in the Borgo de' Greci, and start thence; and the rich man, instigated by Laura, and minded to do the thing handsomely if it were done at all, had allowed his daughter to let all the guests understand that the host received them at his house in town, and begged that they would take no thought about the means of their transport to the villa.

By two o'clock in the afternoon the whole party had assembled in the Borgo. There were three of

the Lunardi family, the aged Canon, Marietta, and Sebastian; three Boccaneras, Ser Simone, his son Sandro, the *Gobbo*, and his daughter Caterina; four of the Pallis, Signor Giuseppe, the host, his daughter Laura, his nephew Nanni, and his cousin and housekeeper, "Aunt" Giuditta; and his reverence Il Canonico Guido Guidi di San Lorenzo;—in all eleven persons;—and there standing ready at the door were three hack carriages for the conveyance of the party.

But how were the eleven to distribute themselves in the three carriages. This is always a matter involving considerable difficulty upon such occasions, and requiring very able generalship on the part of him or her—(the latter it should be; a marshal of the other sex is sure, in these cases, to get into the most fatal difficulties, and have the wrong man in the wrong place;)—on whom the responsibility of command falls.

In the present case, the difficult duty naturally fell on Laura. And she had, on due deliberation, fully settled it all in her head that morning, without, however, feeling sure that she would be able to have it all exactly her own way.

"Let me go in the carriage with you, cousin Laura!" said Nanni; "I have so much to say to you.—You and I and Aunt Giuditta, eh! That will do very well."

"With Caterina for fourth; we must have four you know,—at least two of the carriages must;—that is what you would wish, *non è vero, Nanni!*" laughed Laura. "But we must not put all the ladies together you know," she continued; "and besides, I must think first of the Signor Canonico."

"I think I had better go with my uncle, Signora Laura, if it is not inconvenient," said Marietta.

"Let the reverend Signor Canonico and the lady Marietta be seated in the first carriage, Laura," said her father, somewhat pompously, with a very graceful bow and a wave of his long white hand towards them as he spoke. "I will go with Signor Guido in the second."

The handsome Canon of San Lorenzo was standing in conversation with the master of the house at one of the windows of the sitting-room. He was not quite so tall as the somewhat gaunt, but still dignified figure of the old jeweller; but as the two stood there, anyone would have said that the admirably proportioned figure of the priest was exactly what a man should be, and that any height in excess was a defect. He had, immediately on arriving, contrived, with the perfect ease and skilful tact of a thorough man of the world, to get into a conversation with Signor Palli, which interested the latter; for Signor Guido Guidi had a habit of making himself exceedingly agreeable to such men as the wealthy jeweller. It has been remarked that few men in Florence knew the wealth of the cautious old gentleman to be anything like what it really was. But the Reverend Guido Guidi had a very tolerably accurate notion of the true state of the case. For such members of the priesthood as the Canon of San Lorenzo, rarely in a Catholic country remain ignorant of any social facts which it imports them to become acquainted with.

So Signor Palli said to his daughter, "His reverence Canon Guidi and I will go together in the second carriage." And the handsome canon bowed

low with an air and a smile of the utmost gratification.

"My dear, good Marietta takes too much care of me," said old Canon Lunardi; "but I need be no tie upon anybody; I need less looking after than some folks half a score of years my juniors."

When Nanni had boldly preferred his claim to accompany his cousin, Sebastian had only ventured a furtively pleading look at his divinity, to which no immediate answer could be returned. And now Marietta said, "I think, Sebastian, if the Signora Laura will permit it, that you had better come with us. My uncle is always more comfortable for having you near him."

"Not a bit of it!" cried the old man. "I don't want him. Dispose of him just as may be most convenient to the rest of the party, Signora Laura!"

"I was going to crave permission of the Signora Marietta to be allowed to accompany her and the Signor Canonico," said the *Gobbo*, very modestly. "But if that would disturb any other arrangements——"

"Not at all! If the *molto reverendo, Signor Canonico*, is quite sure he does not need the attendance of Signor Sebastian," said Laura, stepping up to the chair in which the old man was sitting, and stooping over him as she spoke.

"Quite sure, my dear!" returned he; "and we shall be delighted to have my old friend, Sandro Boccanera, with us,—shall we not, Marietta?"

"Shall we go down stairs, then?" said Laura. "You are to go in the first carriage, Signora."

Marietta was a little disconcerted at having failed

in separating Sebastian from his mistress; though she still hoped they might not be together.

So the old man went down leaning on Marietta's arm, and the rest of the party followed, Guidi and the jeweller bringing up the rear, and talking together as they descended the wide staircase.

Old Simon Boccanera, after a very formally courteous salutation had passed between him and his senior partner with low bows on both sides, had taken little notice of anybody, and had received as little beyond a kind smile and shake of the hand from Laura. It was not from any feeling of shyness on his part—that is a malady almost unknown to Italians—nor from any neglect on the part of his companions. But the strange, self-absorbed man was, as usual with him, only present in the body, and not above half present in the mind. He had found on a side table a scrap of old engraving of some arabesque ornament, which Laura had been experimenting on by filling it in with colours. And his whole mind forthwith seizing on the aliment most perfectly adapted to its habits and idiosyncrasy, was entirely engrossed with the speculation on combination of form and colour which the fragment of paper suggested to him. When the others began to descend he followed them, still thinking but little where he was, and still holding the engraving in his hand.

"Ah! Signor Boccanera," said Laura, "you have been ferreting out my secrets, as you always do. But I was only trying some fancies of mine about the combinations of colours."

"Yes, Signora Laura, I see. But it seems to me, that if a black ground——"

"You are very right to carry the paper with you, Signor Simone. You will study the matter, and we will talk it over."

And so the old canon was handed into the carriage; Marietta took her place by his side; the *Gobbo*, as had been settled, placed himself opposite to them, and his father, without any word having been said by himself or anybody else on the subject, followed him and took the fourth seat in an abstracted manner, with the half-coloured engraving still in his hand.

There was no objection of any kind to the selection of a place he had thus made, and the first carriage drove off, so far simplifying Laura's task.

"*Sua Riverenza* and my father will go in the second carriage," said Laura; "and Aunt Giuditta and I will go in the other. My father would not permit us to sit on the front seat, and yet I don't like him to have the sun on his back."

"I am to be in the carriage with you, Cousin Laura, you know!" said Nanni; and Sebastian looked very disconsolate, thinking that the fortunes of the day were going sorely against him.

"And where will you sit, dear Caterina?" continued the *generalissima*. "These gentlemen will not be content if we have all the ladies in one carriage."

"If I shall not disturb the conversation between Signor Palli and his reverence," said Caterina, rather ruefully, but with the best grace she could muster. Upon which his reverence, with a graceful bow and most courteous smile, holding the door of the carriage in one hand, motioned her with the other to the vacant seat by the side of Signor Palli, who had

already got in, and was sitting bolt upright, with his gold eyeglass in his hand, with which he waved her a very majestic permission, rather than invitation, to place herself by his side.

So poor Caterina was forced to accept this place of honour; Guidi followed her into the carriage, taking the place in front of the jeweller; and the coachman seeing that four persons only remained for the other carriage, and well pleased to have but three for his own horses to pull up the hill, shut the door, and was getting on his box to go off after the first carriage.

Sebastian began to think that things were looking a little better; but Nanni would have preferred putting his rival—as he instinctively felt him to be—into the fourth place in the second carriage. The fair and able general, however, had not quite finished her dispositions yet.

"Do look at these wretched horses, cousin Nanni," she said, pointing to those of the third carriage; "don't let them drive off. Stay a minute! It is quite clear that those horses ought to have the four to draw, and ours the three only. *Non è vero?*"

"*Già davvero!*" he answered, quite pleased at the prospect of having matters all his own way; "I don't think these cats would get up the hill at all with a full load!"

"Well, then! look here, Nanni!" said she, turning aside with him a moment. "Do be a good fellow, and go with them. Caterina there will be so disappointed if you don't! Just see how forlorn she looks."

"And you want to be rid of me, cousin; is not that it?"

"Not so! But I am at home, and I must think of others before myself."

"And I looked forward so to the drive with you, cousin!"

"But you wanted to come with me to please *me*, Nanni, I know. Now won't you, to please me, do as I would have you? There is a good fellow! Now, be sure and make yourself as agreeable to my little Katie as you can. And here is a secret in your ear, —but a fast secret, mind!—she would never have come at all, if I had not told her you were coming up from the Casentino, and were to be with us."

So Nanni, scarcely knowing whether to be pleased, or the reverse, found himself, at all events, under the necessity of obeying. Nor, despite all business-like considerations, could he help feeling exceedingly flattered by the very evident change in the pretty Caterina's face and bearing, when this unexpected piece of strategy was operated in her favour; a change, which seemed strongly to corroborate the not strictly true assertion which Laura had made respecting her motives for being present. So the second carriage departed, with its two pair of passengers in no very discontented mood; and the two tête-à-tête talks, which following, interrupted each other as little as either party could have desired. It may be that the courteous priest's attention may have wandered for a moment now and then from the somewhat slow discourse of his companion and vis-à-vis, to take note of what was passing between the young people; for the clergy of the Catholic church have a very strong thirst for information on all that is going on around them, especially with regard to matters of

the kind which now fell under the extremely intelligent observation of Canon Guidi.

Nanni and Caterina were, on their side, wholly innocent of intruding in any way, either by tongue, ear or eye on the conversation of their elders. And when the drive was at an end, Nanni, if he had been more in the habit of rendering an account of himself or his own thoughts and feelings than was the case, would have caught himself thinking what a pity it was that the Perini property could not be kept together by means of a different love-making than the very up-hill one he had been set to work on.

When the second carriage had driven off with its freight, Aunt Giuditta, and Laura, and Sebastian were left still standing on the pavement, about to get into the carriage with the wretched bad nags. It was very evident that the other two carriages would be much a-head of them on their way up the steep hill.

Sebastian was radiant, as he handed the ladies into the old shandrydan, which became, in his eyes, the most glorious triumphal car that ever mortal sate in.

"Are you grateful, Signore?" whispered Laura, as he handed her in, after having first done the same by Aunt Giuditta.

"Do you ask me for information's sake?" he answered in the same tone, emphasising his meaning, lover's fashion, on the hand he held in his.

How much better ladies could get in and out of carriages if men would only let their hands, arms and elbows alone! Much more easily to themselves,—much more conveniently! But how excellent is the fiction that they cannot do so! What would society do if

it were abolished? How many fond hearts find it exceedingly difficult to put into words all that may be put by the mutest booby into a squeeze of the hand! It is a great and important institution, that handing of the daughters of Eve hither and thither. It has, like everything else human, its evils as well as advantages; and there *are* handings that the stronger, and far more the weaker sex would fain escape from. But would they be content, for any consideration, to lose the chances provided by the institution once and for ever? Not a bit of it! Let us keep the courteous custom, my friends, and make the most of it.

"No!" returned Laura, "I ask you, if I am to speak the truth, not for information, but for admiration. I think my strategy deserves some."

"Some! Napoleon might take a lesson from you in the marshalling of his forces!"

"And yet, friend, you were all in the woeful mood just now, up-stairs! Do you think I did not mark you? You had no faith in me, *Bastiano mio!* either in little matters or great matters!"

"Nay, Laura, I *am* behaving better now. But as for this morning's drive, I never dared to imagine that I should have had such a pleasure as this!"

"What a shame it is," said Aunt Giuditta, "to send out such a pair of horses as these; I declare the others will be at the villa an hour before us!"

"We will try to be patient, Aunt Giuditta," said Laura. "Signor Sebastiano must do his best to render the drive as little tedious as may be."

"But he can't prevent the sun from burning us as brown as chestnuts, I suppose; can he?" grumbled the old lady, who was not altogether pleased with the

arrangements for the drive. "And to sit here to be dragged through the dust at a foot's pace! I shall be in a fidget all the way; for Signor Giuseppe won't know what orders to give till I come."

And so saying, Aunt Giuditta subsided gradually and was as fast asleep as a model *chaperone* should be, under the circumstances, before they were half a mile from the city gate.

And Laura and Sebastian each felt and declared that they had such an infinity of things to say to the other, and that now was an opportunity for saying them such as could not be surpassed, and might not occur a second time for many a long day,—and yet they wasted many of the precious minutes in silence, or in words which had but little more, or, perhaps, less, of meaning in them. And what is the use of attempting to put what they said into type? One has but command over an unlimited supply of question stops, marks of admiration, italics and breaks. And after one has done one's best with these, eked out with every possible inventory of attitudes, glances, and expressions, would not every silliest lad and lass who have ever loved be ready to testify that all our efforts were nothing worth, and that the description was pale, colourless, and feckless, when compared with their own quite inexpressible recollections of the reality? There were the happy pair, sitting in the broiling sunshine between two stone walls, painfully dragged along the uphill road ankle deep in dust, in a wretched, jolting, old hackney *calèche*, by two miserable jades of horses! But half a century later, the memory of that drive lived in the hearts of both of them, as of a time too heavenly and exquisite for words; a memory which

made the sunshine of after years dim in comparison with that by-gone glory,—which represented the fairest scenes of earth as poor and common-place, by the side of that glorified bit of dusty road!

Sleep then, good kindly *chaperones* sweet and opportune slumbers! and have mercy, wretched kill-joy interlopers of the *de trop* genus! Pause before you are guilty of destroying happiness which it is as much in your power to kill as it is to crush a butterfly, but which it is equally beyond your power to create or to give!

Notwithstanding the slowness of the horses, whose incapability had so strongly excited aunt Giuditta's indignation, the spot at which the path to the villa branches off from the great Bologna road was reached all too soon. For nearly half a mile a very beautiful terrace path, commanding a view of the Valdarno flooded with the afternoon sunshine, had to be traversed on foot before the villa could be reached. And this path was quite narrow enough and rough enough, and in some parts steep enough to have justified the offer and the acceptance of a great deal of assistance in the traversing of it. But then Aunt Giuditta had to be waked up, and to be accompanied in the walk, and that circumstance altered the aspect of the matter very notably. However the *chaperone* could not be left sleeping in the carriage, so she had to be waked and got out of it. And thus by the time the trio had joined their predecessors at the villa, the two who had been wrapped into the seventh Heaven, had time to subside, and put their necks again into the yoke of their respective positions.

"SCHIFANOIA" as the jeweller called his villa, and as it was very legibly labelled on the stone gate-posts

of the entrance, was placed in a situation that really merited the appellation. The signification of the word is a "Refuge from trouble." The Italians are very fond of giving such kind of names to their villas, and of representing to themselves the pleasures of a country life according to the Horatian style of language and thought. But it is more an imagination than a reality with them. Either the old jeweller had no troubles to escape from, or he sought some other place of refuge from them. For he rarely came near his "Schifanoia!"

The little property was entered by as handsome an iron gateway as if the most superb equipages might be expected to seek entrance at it, although no wheeled vehicle could come near the place. Within this was a small court-yard, on one side of which a low parapet wall defended it from the edge of the rock on which the house was built, and which made that part of the side of the Apennine quite precipitous. Over this low wall the view of the Valdarno towards the Chianti hills to the right, and the Vallombroso mountains to the left, ranged over an exquisite landscape. In this court-yard was the front entrance to the house, and the corner of an out-building, which jutted out from it, was so placed as to touch the edge of the precipice, and thus cut off all passage further than the court except through the house. On the other side of this corner was a small garden also with a low parapet wall along the edge of the precipice, and with a veranda or *loggia* into which the principal rooms opened.

When the three last comers entered the court-yard, nobody was to be seen; but they could hear

the voices of the rest of the party from the other side of the corner.

"I warrant me, Signor Giuseppe has done nothing towards getting the dining-room in a fit state to dine in," said the lady Giuditta, ringing a tremendous peal at the house door. "I must see to everything, or nothing is done. I ought to have been in the first carriage instead of the last."

And the "Martha"-like old lady bustled away as soon as the door was opened, to see that shutters were unclosed, chairs and tables dusted, and everything in good order for the feast. As to the kitchen department itself, that gave Aunt Giuditta no uneasiness, for the old cook from the Borgo de' Greci had been sent up the night before, and his mistress knew that he could be relied on within his own dominions.

Laura and Sebastian passed through the house to join the rest of the party, who were assembled in the *loggia* and terrace garden on the other side of it. And truly a more charming little paradise it would be difficult to meet with. A genuine "Schifanoia" it might well have been to any owner capable of flying from his cares. But there are men to whom no refuge of the sort is available or even welcome,—men, who not only ride ever, as Horace says, with black care sitting behind them, but who insist on always carrying a pillion for the intruder. And Signor Giuseppe Palli, had he confessed the truth, would have admitted that he was a happier man sitting in his spider's web den amid his books on the Ponte Vecchio, bolt upright in his speckless suit of black, with his double gold eye-glasses in his hand, than he was here in his own "Schifanoia," equally

rigid and bolt upright in his chair, equally specklessly black, and with the gold eye-glasses still sporting dignified action in his aristocratic looking white hand. A certain amount of satisfaction he had, as he sate in a large chair brought out from the house on the angle of the terrace overlooking the lovely view beneath them—the city with its long line of crenelated walls, its dominating cupola and subject spires and towers of every degree—the rich dark-green extent of the Cascine woods—the glistening silver cord of Arno gliding away to the turn at which it enters a gorge in the hills at Signa, seven miles below Florence;—and beyond all this the thickly populated and fertile valley stretching as far as Pistoia, twenty miles away;—a certain amount of satisfaction in the consciousness of possession, as he recounted to Canon Guidi, and his nephew, Nanni, standing beside him, how the Prince of Torrenorcia from Naples, had wished to become the purchaser of this villa, when it had been sold by the old Tanarini at the time of their break up, but that he had taken a fancy to it. Laura liked it! "*Che volete?*" It was a folly for a poor tradesman like him; but one could not always be thinking of business! And perhaps before very long, when Mistress Laura should have a home of her own—(here a glance and a very slight wave of the eyeglass towards his nephew)—he might leave the business to the care of his old friend Simone there, and come and live here in peace and quietness for the rest of his days. An old woman to make his soup and his bed would be all he should require, and "my old friend Don Pancrazio—(there he comes)—to look in and play a game of dominoes and have a little quiet chat of an evening! An old

man wants but little, Signor Canoncio, and that but for a little time! And it is well after an active life to have an interval for a little thought before the end comes."

As if the old spider had left himself any capability of seriously thinking about anything save flies, up to the latest rattle of his latest breath!

But this was the way he played his part before himself and others, appropriately in those few and tedious "Schifanoia" hours.

The Don Pancrazio, who entered the garden from the house, as he was speaking, was the *curato* of La Lastra, and had been invited by Signora Giuditta to make up the party to a dozen. He was a priest of the kindly, genial, florid-faced, jovial sort, as ignorant as a schoolboy, and as open-hearted, very much like a jolly farmer newly caught and dressed up in canonicals for the nonce,—a clerical type very common in the country villages of Tuscany. He always wore a shabby round chimney-pot-hat, keeping his fluffy triangular beaver for going down to Florence on occasions when it was necessary to meet his bishop; a straight-cut frock coat, a pair of shining camblet inexpressibles, coarse worsted stockings on his jolly round calves, and thick laced-up shoes, innocent of any orthodox clerical buckle. He always went to sleep while hearing confessions, always gave plenary absolution when he waked up at the end of them, clapped all the young fellows on the back, chucked all the girls under the chin, took very good care to be present at all the jollifications of his richer parishioners, but was equally sure not to be absent from the homes of the poorer in their times of trouble and sorrow.

A stronger or more striking contrast could not well be found between two men of the same profession and the same country than between the jolly country parson and the learned, dignified, gentlemanlike, and eminently clerical Canon of San Lorenzo. A synod of bishops would have declared without a dissenting voice that the Reverend Guido Guidi was a credit and an honour to the Church to which he belonged; while the same authoritative body would assuredly have shaken their grave heads at much both in Don Pancrazio's appearance and in his conduct. And of course it is not for heretics and laymen to impugn any part of so competent a judgment. Yet thus much, heretics, laymen, and foreigners may rest perfectly assured of, whatever the big-wigs at Rome may think of the matter, that the Reverend Guido Guidi, and the like of him, have done much to bring their Church into the troublous and dangerous position in which she finds herself; while the *curato* Don Pancrazio and his peers are the men who will save, if it be saved, the Roman Catholic Church from being swept from the face of the country. For the whole population of La Lastra would rise in open-mouthed rebellion against any Government so irreligious as to deprive them of the invaluable spiritual consolation of Don Pancrazio's sleepy absolutions; but few men could be found in Florence to object to the most summary and complete abolition of Canon Guidi and his compeers.

Don Pancrazio stopped short and made a profound bow to the assembled company as soon as he had emerged from the *loggia* into the garden. Then advancing to the corner of the terrace where the master of the house was sitting, he made just such another

to him, and then shook hands with him. Then he bowed equally lowly to the sleek and glossy canon, who sat beside him, who returned the compliment by a very slight inclination.

"It is a festival that don't come often in the calendar to see you at 'Schifanoia,' my good and much-esteemed sir!" said Don Pancrazio; "and we must make the most of it when it comes. Yonder is the Signora Giuditta! I must go and thank her for kindly thinking of me!"

Meantime Laura and Sebastian, after replying to Nanni's somewhat scoffing inquiries as to their journey up the hill behind those two broken-down brutes, had joined another group at the other end of the terrace. There a chair had been placed for old Canon Giacomo, and Marietta was standing by his side, while the *Gobbo* had seated himself on the low wall of the terrace close to them.

"Well, uncle, how did you manage the walk? Are you tired? I ought to have been there to give you an arm," said Sebastian.

"My dear boy, I enjoyed the walk immensely; not one of them more, I'll be bound. And I am not a bit tired, only as hungry as a Franciscan of a Saturday night. *I* didn't want your arm, my son! *Che!** Your arm was better employed, I guess. And what could I want, when I had the care of my Marietta!"

"Still I could have wished that you had remained with us, Sebastian," said Marietta.

This was ungracious enough towards Laura, who had come up with him, and was standing near. But Marietta had no wish to be gracious to her; and had

* Che! What! Pooh! An ever-recurring Tuscan exclamation.

spoken for her rather than for Sebastian. And Laura understood all this perfectly well. Instead of taking up in any way the gauntlet thus thrown down to her, however, she said to the Canon, stooping over his silver locks, like a tall slender lily drooping over a grey old moss-grown stone,

"I dare say, Signor Canonico, that Signor Sebastian and the Signora Marietta often dispute which shall have the pleasure of waiting on you, and you would be puzzled to say which takes most care of you! But for my part I always fancy that there can be no tending like the tending of a woman."

"You are right enough there, my dear," returned the old man, taking Marietta's hand as she stood by him. "If it had not been for my Marietta, I should have died a dozen years ago. It is only her care and tenderness that keeps me alive."

Marietta made no reply; but with her disengaged hand gently smoothed the long white locks at the back of the old man's neck.

"But, Signora Marietta," said the *Gobbo*, in a singularly soft voice, "you must not forget to finish what you were going to tell me of that little villa that stands so naked on the hill-side there beyond Petraia. Pardon me, Signora Laura and Signor Sebastiano, but there can be no treat, I think, for a Florentine equal to looking over the Valdarno from such a point as this, with such a cicerone as the Signora Marietta to read you off the story of every stock and stone in it."

"It were a pity," answered Marietta, "if all the history of all we see were not stored in some better mind and memory than mine, Signor Sandro. But I was going to say that, when that villa was confiscated,

after the fight at Montemurlo, by the tyrant Cosmo, and Lionardo Cigoli, the owner, was beheaded, the well in the court-yard, which had never been known to fail, dried up, and remained dry till a century and a-half later, when a Cigoli recovered possession of the property. Then the well flowed again, and has never failed since. That is all!"

Marietta had turned, in telling her story, towards the *Gobbo*, so that the Canon was behind her; and he took advantage of the circumstance to execute in pantomime a sort of *staccato crescendo* movement as with the bow of a violin, expressing, for his own and Sebastian's satisfaction, his opinion of his niece's history. And Sebastian telegraphed back his appreciation of the old gentleman's criticism, at the same time raising for an instant a monitory forefinger, with a glance at Marietta. From all which it would have been clear to a looker-on, that there were subjects on which the sympathies of the old man and the young one were more in accordance than those of either of them with their relative. In the *Gobbo* Boccanera she had a kindred mind and an eagerly willing disciple.

Don Pancrazio meanwhile, when he had gone to pay his respects to the Signora Giuditta, had been taken by her into the house to assist her in seeing that all was in due order for the serving of the dinner; and he now appeared in front of the loggia, and taking off his hat with a flourish, intoned in a magnificent great bass voice:

"Signori, e Signore! In tavola! in tavola! in tavola! in tavola! Signori e Signore, buon prò! buon prò!" *

* Literally, "Ladies and gentlemen! to table, to table! may it well profit you!"

"Bravo, Don Pancrazio!" cried the old Canon, rising alertly from his chair. "I never heard the call to table more gladly!"

"Nor I!" said Nanni. "I shall dine for six; I am as hungry as a hound!"

"Very reverend sirs!" said the master of the house, rising, and very magnificently motioning to the two dignitaries to precede, "pray honour my poor house by accepting a collation." And so saying he led the two canons—the elder still leaning on the arm of Marietta—into the house, leaving the rest of the party to follow as they liked.

In the centre of one side of the table sat Signor Palli, with Marietta on his right hand and Canon Guidi on his left. On the other side of Marietta was her uncle, and next to the magnificent canon of San Lorenzo, Master Simone, somewhat to the disgust of the former. Aunt Giuditta had assigned that place to the *Gobbo*; but he having no affection for the priest, and not at all coveting the honour proposed to him, adroitly put his father, who was mooning absently round the table, into the place in his stead. Next to old Canon Lunardi was Caterina; and Nanni, very much in the position of a donkey between two bundles of hay, sat between her and Laura. On the other side of Laura was Sebastian; next to him the *Gobbo*, and then aunt Giuditta, with Don Pancrazio on her other side, who thus completed the circle by having Simon Boccanera between him and Guidi.

And then the dinner began by the handing round of a vast variety of those introductory dainties which the Italians fancy serve as whets to the appetite, such as anchovies, pickled cucumbers, uncooked ham,

slices of tunny fish in oil, sausage with garlic and without, olives, small strips of red herring uncooked and served in oil, etc., etc. Then followed the "*minestra*," the "*fritto*," the "*umido*," the "*arrosto*," * with their proper accompaniments in due order. After that the "*dolce*" in sundry kinds, and a very multifarious dessert.

Only Tuscan wine, but excellent in quality, was put on the table till the roast lamb and roast fowls came. Then some execrable stuff, calling itself sherry, was produced, which everybody present supposed to be something very fine, though none of them cared to drink it, and some very fair champagne. With the *dolce* came two or three sorts of Italian sweet wines.

And everybody talked and laughed aloud, and made the banquet a far noisier affair than would have been deemed at all decorous among graver and less child-like people. And though the party was composed, as the reader knows, of very heterogeneous social elements, nobody was the least oppressed by the superior social status of his neighbour, or laughed the less loud on that account; nobody seemed to have any desire at all to blink or ignore the fact that the object of the meeting was to get all the enjoyment possible out of it, and nobody felt it *infra dig.* to admit that he liked eating and drinking, and chattering and laughing.

Before they came to the desert, they began drinking healths to each other in the interval between the removal of one dish and the appearance of its successor. And after every health proposed, Don Pancrazio, unsolicited, and apparently as *ex officio* toast-

* Soup, fried food, stewed food, roast.

master, chanted, striking the table with his hand to command attention, and looking round with shining rosy gills to invite any voice to join him, "*Evviva! Evviva! Evviva! Evviva! Evviva! Evviva! Buon pro!*"

And by the time the long repast had been brought to a conclusion, the amount of noise was such that any Englishman would have felt not the slightest doubt that all the party were considerably advanced towards intoxication. But he would have been most entirely mistaken. Most of the party had drank one-third of wine to two-thirds of water, the wine being pure unbrandied juice of the grape to begin with. No! they were all perfectly sober when they left the table; but they made none the less noise for that.

As soon as they had taken their coffee, they all strolled out into the garden, except the old canon who declared that he must have half an hour's nap before he should be ready for his violin. The others dispersed themselves in twos and threes on the terrace, or among the shrubberies.

While Sebastian, at Signor Palli's request, occupied himself with looking out the music they proposed to execute, the *Gobbo* Boccanera joined him, and entered into conversation with him. Meantime Marietta observed Laura and Nanni go off towards the shrubbery together, to her great satisfaction. Had the *tête-à-tête* drive of that morning resulted in a break of all that might ever have been between her and Sebastian? Had they recognised the impossibility of ever coming together for better for worse?—so entirely and palpably for *worse*, that the impossibility of any such union was so very evident to her! Heaven grant it might be so! One huge difficulty and stumbling-

block would thus be removed out of her uphill but destined path.

Poor little Caterina also had marked the same pairing off with very different feelings. She had, however, a very complete faith in Laura, and could not help feeling a suspicion that this colloquy between the two cousins might be the working out of the audacious plans which Laura had in part revealed to her. If so, she hardly knew whether for the moment to feel more of consolation or nervous trepidation from the thought. Surely Laura would say nothing that could hurt her maidenly feelings as regarded Nanni, or place her in a position of humiliation as regarded his family. No! She could trust dear Laura! she repeated to herself. And then there was lurking at the bottom of her heart a tinge of that uneasy feeling, ineradicable from the breast of any daughter of Eve, which prompted the thought, that there could not but be danger in this solitary *tête-à-tête* conference between her beautiful friend and the incomparable, the irresistible Nanni! In short, poor little Caterina passed the after-dinner hour in a state of very uncomfortable, nervous fidget, and treated unlucky Don Pancrazio to very short answers, and very much at cross purposes, when, as he was lounging on the terrace with an after-dinner cigar in his mouth, he made sundry well-meant advances towards a little of that semi-pastoral, semi-flirting sort of talk, by which the pastors of his church, and perhaps those of some other communions, are wont to make manifest the extra importance which they attach to such souls of the weaker sex as inhabit very pretty clay tabernacles.

The master of the house and Canon Guidi were

pacing up and down the terrace in an elegant and dignified manner, still in close conversation; and the *Gobbo* was, while talking with Sebastian in the sitting-room, watching them out of the open window, and thinking that he should much like to know what such a pair could have to talk so much about together.

And then, after an hour or so, the little party re-assembled; the music-desks were set near the open windows of the sitting-room, the quartette party rosined their bows and tuned their instruments, and the others disposed themselves, those in the room, who really wished to listen to the music, and those, who liked it only as an accompaniment to their own *sotto-voce* chat, in the moonlit *loggia* outside.

For my own part, though a quartette of Beethoven's is a delight to me, I think I should have contented myself with as much of it as I could have enjoyed through the open terrace windows, so exquisitely lovely was the evening hour in that terrace *loggia*, with all the Valdarno and fair Florence bathed in the moonlight beneath it!

And they all enjoyed themselves in their different ways more perhaps than often falls to the lot of all the component parts of a pleasure party. Laura was one of the indoor division—perhaps because she deemed it proper to be by the side of Aunt Giuditta, possibly because the room contained some other attraction, which acted on her more or less consciously. The members of the quartette party were, of course, at their posts. Don Pancrazio got into disgrace by snoring, but was too hardened an offender to be afflicted by the circumstance. Marietta and the *Gobbo* had a long talk, sitting together at the angle of the garden terrace, which commanded the more

entire view of that world of villas, which Ariosto estimated to be equal to Rome twice told. And Nanni and Caterina (the latter now very much reassured as to the nature and results of that suspicious *tête-à-tête* between the two cousins) perhaps enjoyed the hours most of all, as they sate, unobserved, save by the all-observing eye of the *Gobbo* under the *loggia* just outside the window.

It was late before the seniors of the party declared it time to return to Florence. The quartette players protested that they never had a more successful or more delightful meeting; and to some of the rest of the party that evening turned out to be one never to be forgotten.

CHAPTER XI.

BUSINESS TALK ON THE PONTE VECCHIO.

AS soon as the canon had gone to his morning mass on the following day, leaning on the arm of Sebastian, Marietta quickly put on her shawl and bonnet, with its thick veil, and set forth on a solitary walk to the Ponte Vecchio. There she went to the shop of "Giuseppe Palli and Simone Boccanera, goldsmiths and dealers in precious stones," and asked the man in the front shop (for Ser Simone was not there) whether she could see Signor Palli. The man vanished through the narrow door in the background of the little place, and emerging again in a minute, requested her to walk in.

"You must be surprised to see me here, Signor Palli," began Marietta; "but I wished to speak to you respecting a matter that interests both of us;—nevertheless if my visit interferes with any more important business, mine can stand over, and I will speak to you at some more favourable time."

"No business can be more important, Signora, than any that you are pleased to honour me with!" returned the polite and dignified old gentleman rising, and making a very low bow, while he indicated to her a seat on the opposite side of the narrow

table, at which he had been sitting,—the only seat in the place, indeed, besides his own,—with a wave of the gold eye-glasses.

Marietta sate down opposite him ; and felt, as he put his glasses on his nose, and sate with his aristocratic hooked beak and narrow old head bent a little on one side, looking at her like a question stop, and awaiting in dead silence what she had to say, that it was a little difficult to begin. Yet she might have guessed that he would entirely agree with her in what she was going to say, altho' it was very possible that they might not look at the matter from a similar point of view.

"Signor Palli," she said, after an awkward pause, "I have reason to fear that the acquaintanceship between our families, now of so many years standing, and which has been the cause of so much enjoyment to my poor uncle, has given rise to a result which cannot be acceptable to us, and which may very possibly be also displeasing to you."

The old man rapidly ran over in his mind the list of his recent money transactions, but finding nothing that apparently had any bearing on the Lunardi family, he was puzzled. "I am quite at a loss, Signora," he said, "to guess the nature of so disagreeable a circumstance. Pray, proceed!"

"One member of our family, Signor Palli, indeed I may say the most important member of it, is a young man of five-and-twenty . . . . and one member of your family is a very charming—a very amiable young lady!"

And there Marietta paused again. But the old money-lender only said, (taking off his glasses, however, as though the matter had already sufficiently

revealed itself to him, to need no longer any such aids to close examination); "Laura is much honoured by your favourable opinion, Signora, ... *pray* proceed."

"Well! Signor Palli, you must be aware .... in short, I am sure that you will give me credit for being anxious not to say anything offensive to a family for whom I have an unfeigned respect; .... but I stand, as it were, in the position of guardian to Sebastian .... you know how things are situated with us .... it is a tremendous responsibility; (the jeweller here bowed his head, very slightly raising his eyebrows into two semi-circles, which very plainly said, 'indeed? well, I should not have thought that,') .... and it is my duty to say in words which I would fain make as little painful as is compatible with clearness, that a marriage between my nephew and your daughter, is not one that can be permitted to take place."

"Most assuredly no such marriage can, or under any conceivable circumstances, could be allowed to take place. Why, my dear madam, should you imagine that there could be anything offensive to me in stating that fact. On the contrary, I am very glad that our opinions tally so well upon the subject. But what is more to the purpose, Signora, permit me to ask what grounds you have for thinking that there is any danger of such a marriage being contemplated by any of the parties concerned?"

"Permit *me* to ask," returned Marietta, with some little flavour of hauteur in her manner, "whether nothing has ever fallen under your own observation, Signor Palli, which might have led you to a similar apprehension?"

....

"Nothing whatever, Signora! and you must forgive me, if I say that any notion of the kind seems to me to be so utterly preposterous, that I can hardly think it likely that it should have been seriously contemplated by . . . . . any of the parties concerned."

"I am well pleased, my dear sir, that you should so strongly feel the incongruity of any such alliance. But, alas! that I should have to confess it! the distinction of birth and of rank, are not recognised in our days, as they once were, and always should be; and I blush to say that even by one of my own race they might be forgotten in the heat of boyish passion!"

The jeweller replaced his glasses on his nose with more of precipitation than often characterised his actions; and leaning on his two hands placed flat on the little table before him, looked hard and scrutinizingly at his visitor across it for a few moments.

"Ah . . . . h!" he said at length; "I *think*, Signora, I understand your meaning; but yet it seems impossible. Excuse me, Signora Marietta, if I ask you to say plainly—and, pray, without the slightest idea of hurting any feelings of mine on the matter—plainly and directly; do you mean that if your nephew Sebastian wished to wed my daughter Laura with my consent, such wedding would not have your approval?"

"Why certainly it could not, Signor Palli, since you ask me to speak clearly. How could it? Notwithstanding your request I hesitate to say what seems offensive, though in truth it is only the absurd notions of these modern days that could find any offence in the matter . . . . "

"Quite so, madam! quite so!" said the jeweller with an air of cordial and pleased assent; "pray go on! I am delighted to hear your sentiments on the subject." And he advanced his head towards her across the table, waiting with a pleasant and courteous smile for her to proceed.

"I was observing, sir," said Marietta, "that in the good days before men's minds had been poisoned and misled by the fatal doctrines with which France has ruined the world, everybody would have felt it a matter of course, and therefore free from offence in the statement of it, that a marriage of the scion and representative of an ancient noble house with the daughter of a tradesman, however estimable, could not be approved or tolerated by the young man's family.

"Quite true! my dear madam! Quite true! I fully agree with you. And, believe me, my dear madam," the old man continued, bowing his head till his long nose all but touched the table, while he held the out-turned palms of both hands (one of them with the gold eye-glass between the finger and thumb) towards her, "believe me, Giuseppe Palli knows his station, and the distance between him and his and you and yours, lady; knows it so well," he continued, raising himself up from his lowly, bowing position, and throwing himself back in his arm-chair, while he emphasized each separate clause of his ensuing words with a majestic wave of the double eye-glass, "knows it so well, Signora Contessa Marietta de' Lunardi,"—low bow, with eye-glass accompaniment,—"that he would as soon think of uniting his only daughter to a scion,—and that scion the representative, as you correctly state,—of that

ancient and most noble family, as he would of giving her in marriage to . . . . a mendicant from Monte Domini.*

A deep and sudden flush rushed over Marietta's face, from the neck to the roots of her glossy, black though silver-flecked tresses; a flush so dark and angry, that it seemed as if the violent heart-bound had sent all the blood in her body to her head. For one instant there flashed out a gleam from those large, dark eyes, that, to a physiologist, might have said something in evidence of her claim to be the rightful descendant of a race in which the breeding of long generations had made it a part of their organic nature to deem themselves of other clay than common mortals;—a glance that made the money-lender's shrewd old eyes drop before it, and suggested a momentary reflection that there were people within the sound of his voice, and that it was well it was so! It was only for an instant, however. In the next, Marietta's habitual self-command had re-assumed its wonted empire. She pressed one hand strongly on her heart, and rising slowly to her full height, while her complexion returned partially, not wholly, to its usual perfect white, and the attitude of her noble figure, and the carriage of her head assumed, unconsciously, a mien and bearing that might have befitted a Juno, compelled to the degradation of personal communication with a vile but rebellious mortal, she said, slowly and calmly,

"Enough said, Signore! Enough that our aims in this matter are the same. Of the feelings and motives that lead to them it were worse than folly to speak. You are wholly incapable of comprehending

* The Florentine poor-house.

my feelings and principles on the subject. And I am, I trust, equally unable to appreciate yours. We will content ourselves with knowing that our intentions and wishes are identical. *You* would not have your daughter married to a poor,—a *very* poor, though not, Signor Palli, a mendicant noble : *I* would rather see my nephew in his shroud than see him wedded with . . . . your daughter ! We are agreed in this, I think."

" Perfectly and entirely, Madame !" said the jeweller, who had also risen, and stood facing her, with his exceptionally tall figure rigid and upright, his two feet planted with the heels close together, his left hand in the bosom of his waistcoat, and his right holding the never-failing eye-glass, as a man who is making a formal bow holds a cocked hat, " Per . . , fect . . . ly and en . . . tire . . , ly !"

" And we may each count on the co-operation of the other to do all that may be necessary for the prevention of so preposterous an union ?"

" For that, Madame, I think I may venture to assure you that no co-operation will be needed. I flatter myself,—I confess, I do flatter myself,—that you may be quite at rest on the subject. I do not think that I shall need assistance in preventing an alliance which you so justly characterise as truly pre . . . pos . . . terous."

" I wish you good morning, Signor Palli. I leave you, well satisfied with the result of our interview."

" Quite so ! madam. Quite so !" said the money-lender, opening the little door into the shop, and bowing low. " I have the honour, Signora Contessa, of wishing you a very good morning !" he added, as

following her to the door of the front shop, he made her a second most magnificent bow.

Marietta walked home, gloomily thinking that the world was further gone in the fatal malady which she considered to be destroying all that was good and noble in it than even she had supposed!

As for Signor Palli, he remained not so entirely at his ease respecting the subject of his interview with the lady as he had chosen to appear. Not that he was much alarmed. He really did, in his inmost heart, consider a marriage of his wealthy heiress with a pauper noble, who was also an unsuccessful musician, as wholly monstrous and out of the question as he had represented it. And he had great faith in Laura's good sense and right judgment. He had not such entire faith in her passive obedience. There had never been any conflict of wills between them; but he nevertheless felt that he should be very loth to enter on such a contest, and could not conceal from himself that he should have misgivings as to the result of it.

Signor Palli had passed, as has been said, some years of his early life in Paris, at a time when ideas and doctrines were rife there, very widely opposed to those which still prevailed in his own country on most of the weightiest questions of social science and manner; and on none more widely than on the degree of authority parents are justified in assuming over their offspring. Signor Palli, as was sure to be the case with a shrewd, hard, ambitious man, conscious of superior energies in the work of "opening the world, his oyster," very incapable of comprehending any other grounds for the superiority of one man over another, and finding himself condemned by the Old World theories and rules to a position of

irremediable inferiority, became a thorough-going partisan of the new ideas. And the education of his daughter had been very much in conformity with this profession of political and social faith. In a great measure this action on her mind had been a negative one. Laura had not been subjected to that training and those influences which made well-educated Italian girls what they were, and, for the most part, still are. But she had been taught to read,—by which I mean, to love reading ;—and she had been permitted and encouraged to read largely of the more serious and less objectionable portion of the new French literature. And the father had a very strong feeling that it would be difficult to induce his daughter to act in opposition to any ideas that had assumed the character of principles in her mind.

It may be easily imagined that such a kind of education *might* have produced results very far from desirable. But Laura had been very fortunate in the lady to whom her education had been entrusted ; and more fortunate still, in that the good seed had fallen on good ground. The strong meat, which might have been fatal to a weaklier organisation, had, assimilated by a fine mental constitution, produced a moral character as admirable as it was exceptional in that clime and time.

But Signor Palli, as he had climbed the hill of years and of social station, had gradually, as usually happens, modified some of his notions. And moreover, as is equally often the case, he never considered the principles which emancipated him from all redevances of suit, service, or submission to those claiming to be his superiors, as being valid or applicable in like manner to those over whom he would fain exer-

cise authority. But he had very strong misgivings as to his success in exercising it in the matter under consideration. In truth, he had a powerful persuasion that Laura would take no husband of another's choosing. But then he had, as he repeated to himself, no reason to imagine that she would think of throwing herself away on a beggar, for whose nobility she had, he was sure, no greater veneration than himself. The silly woman, who had just left him, no doubt imagined that her noble beggar kinsman had but to throw the handkerchief to a daughter of "the people" for the offer to be jumped at. But he had no reason to fear any such folly from Laura, and no ground whatever for imagining that it would be more agreeable to her than to himself.

And then he set himself to consider how far he was prepared, if the worst should come to the worst, to exercise the power which he unquestionably had in his own hands. His wealth was his own. But what could he do with it? Was it not valuable only in connection with schemes, and hopes, and ambitions, of all which Laura was the centre figure, and the absolutely indispensable protagonist. Should he, in case of rebellion, prefer his name to his blood, build all his hopes on his brother's more obedient son, and make him his heir, and the sole foundation-stone of the future Palli fortunes?

The old man turned the matter consideringly in his mind, but came to the conclusion that he could not do it! Laura was his own, and Nanni was not his own. The sole means by which that ugly clause in our life indentures, about carrying nothing with us out of the world, could be in any degree got round and set at naught, was by leaving one's wealth

to one's own flesh and blood, and thus enjoying in anticipation the permanence of it. Left to Laura, it would be still his, and he could look forward to this vicarious possession of it. Passed away to Nanni, it was in truth gone from him, and a few more years would then indeed be the end of all! And he had never had any affection for his brother or his brother's son. He and Carlo had always pulled together very well, and had many transactions to their mutual advantage. And Nanni, his nephew, being the heir to so goodly a portion of the Perini acres, and ensuring by a marriage with his cousin the continuance of the name (for the old liberty, fraternity, equality man thought much of that), he was evidently the most suitable match on the cards for Laura. But the old money-lender had no such feeling for him as could make the passing of his wealth to him a mitigation of the pang of parting with it. No! he could not disinherit his daughter,—it would come too nearly to disinheriting himself. So with a passing reflection on the beauty of his own disinterested paternal love, he dismissed *that* solution from his mind.

Still he thought—he *did* think—he could trust to Laura's admirable good sense. He could not fancy her guilty of such insane folly as that absurd woman had spoken of. But, after all, it might not be amiss, in case of the worst, to have such aid as she had hinted at to fall back on, let it be set in action by however monstrously absurd prejudices it might.

The jeweller was still ruminating over these thoughts, when he was told by a face peeping through the half-opened door of communication with the shop that another visitor wished to speak with him; and a moment afterwards the Reverend Canon Guido

Guidi entered the little sanctum. Signor Palli received his new guest with his best air of distinguished courtesy, and with a very gracious smile of welcome indicated to him the chair so lately occupied by Marietta. But there was a shade more of understood equality of standing, and of apparent intelligence, between the two men than might have been expected.

Very many most secret colloquies had taken place in that little den hanging over the river, and the master of it was in the habit of considering himself most effectually "tiled" there. And there was little likelihood that it should ever chance to turn out otherwise. Yet it did so happen that the ensuing conference between the dignified ecclesiastic and the money-lender was listened to by other ears than the four belonging to those gentlemen.

For shortly after the departure of Marietta the *Gobbo* arrived at the shop, and sitting in his corner at his little bench had seen the canon pass in to his interview with the jeweller. Now these queer little houses on the Ponte Vecchio have, as any passer over the bridge may observe, a miniature little first floor above the two rooms on the level of the street. It must have been a matter of some ingenuity to contrive out of the small space a staircase by which to reach this upper floor. But the builder has overcome the difficulty by constructing a very narrow ladder-like stair, in the thickness of the wall between the shop and the back-room. No stout gentleman or crinolined lady can ever reach that mysterious little first floor; but for mortals of tolerably slender proportions there is practicable access to those two little bits of rooms. In the tenement occupied by Giuseppe Palli the front room was used as a

magazine for various materials and tools connected with the business,—a grindstone among others,—for which it would have been impossible to find room in the shop below. And the persons employed in the latter had therefore frequent occasion to run up and down the little stairs. The back room, that over Signor Palli's own private sanctum, was considered to be the studio of Signor Boccanera, the junior partner. No secrets of any kind were ever transacted there. But the dreamy, artistic-minded Simone would sit there with his drawing and modelling materials, imagining a design for a necklace, or experimenting on a new idea for a bracelet.

Assuredly it would never have occurred to him to take advantage of a knob-hole and a loose tile in the floor to listen to aught that passed in the room below. But it did occur to his *Gobbo* son. And when the latter saw the Canon of San Lorenzo, whom he very cordially hated, seek a private interview with his *padrone*, he was assailed by a strong curiosity to know what those two *could* have to say to each other, as a sequel to all the talk he had with some little surprise observed between them at the villa, and during the drive the day before. So, his father being absent, he quietly slipped up the little staircase, as quietly closed on himself the door of his father's room, and gave an attentive (and sharp) ear to what was going on immediately beneath him.

"I thought I would look in as I was passing by, but I scarcely expected to find you here this morning, my dear sir, after our late hours at your delightful villa last night," began the priest.

"Business habits, Signor Canonico! The habits of a lifetime!" said the other.

"But it is not every man that can continue his habits of a lifetime, and work like a young man, and look like one," returned the canon, with a complimentary bow.

"Well, I am as ready for business as ever I was," returned the man of money; "the more difficult thing, I find, is to be as ready as formerly for amusement. But your visit, reverend sir, I presume has reference to the former."

"Why, yes; if I should be so fortunate as to bring the matters we were talking of yesterday to such a point, as that they should deserve to be called business."

"The distinction is a good one. As you put the thing yesterday, I confess I do not see——"

"Look you, my dear sir; we must start from the right point. We must enter on the question, quite understanding that it cannot be treated altogether on the usual business principles. It must be considered as an exceptional case. And I should never have dreamed of proposing such a case to the consideration of a mere ordinary (money-lender he was going to say, but substituted the convenient generality) man of business."

"But, indeed, my good sir, I claim to be no other than that—a man of business, who conducts his business on the most ordinary principles."

"But still, one capable, I *think*, Signor Palli—one capable of comprehending that exceptional advantages may sometimes be found by departing from ordinary rules. I quite understand that presenting myself here simply as a canon beneficiary of San Lorenzo, I could not expect you to give me the sum I want on my merely personal security."

"I am afraid it would be very widely out of the ordinary course of business to do so," remarked the jeweller, shaking his head with a quiet smile.

"Quite so! *A chi lo dite?** But that is not quite the case with the proposition I have the honour to lay before you. The money required is for a certain purpose, with which you are well acquainted. It is to be expended in a manner which will enable me to repay it easily, and which will justify me, on the strictest commercial principles, in paying a very handsome price for it."

"Even an usurious price, Signor Canonico!" said the old man, putting his eye-glass on his nose, and looking up with a mock air of innocent inquiry.

"Bah! You know better, my dear sir, than to imagine that I attach any importance to that obsolete rubbish, as absurd as it is impracticable! All that can result from refusing to pay for any article what it is fairly worth under all the circumstances of the case, is that you won't get the article."

"It has seemed so to my poor judgment," said the jeweller, with a slight shrug, and a deprecatory wave of his glass.

"My proposal, Signor Palli, would contemplate paying the full value for the accommodation required."

"But there are risks," rejoined the money-lender, "which no amount of per centage can induce a prudent man to encounter. I always prefer to take, rather than to give, the long odds. But that is a matter of temperament—merely a matter of temperament. The question, as it presents itself to my

* "To whom do you tell it?" A common expression, equivalent to "Do you think I don't know that?"

mind, Signor Canonico, is not so much what is the per centage you should pay for the accommodation you wish, as what are the chances of repayment of the principal sum."

"Why, my good friend, even if you doubted, as I am sure you do not—but even if you doubted of my honour and good faith, I should be bound——"

"Pardon, if I interrupt you, my dear sir, to say that any such doubt is out of the question. The doubt rests not on your good will, but on the possibilities of the case. This money is to be sunk in an investment which can be reproductive only in one way. A certain sum duly expended at Rome—I neither ask nor wish to know how expended—would probably secure to you the advancement you are bent on attaining. That point gained, you would be able and willing to repay me my advance, together with a due remuneration for the risk I should have run. But forgive me if I observe that the whole thing turns on the amount of that probability."

"For that, Signor Palli, I *can* only refer you to your own judgment of me. *I* consider the probability a perfectly safe one. Do you think me the man to be bubbled out of my money?"

"But you might (very judiciously, if I would let you) run a greater risk with *my* money than you would with your own," said the jeweller, with a courteous smile.

"True! if it were altogether your money, Signor Palli; but remember that, if I were so deluded into losing the money lent by you, I could not wash my hands of the matter and remain a free man. You would have my bond, and there is my canonry. It

would not be a good speculation for me to risk losing the money advanced, though it did come in the first instance out of your pocket and not out of mine."

"There is truth in that; and I do *not* think that you are a man to throw away hard cash, which is a certainty, after a delusive hope of the kind."

"And permit me to remind you," put in Guido, eagerly, as he thought he saw the usurer inclining to look favourably on his suit, "I am quite aware that a man in your position, Signor Palli, is quite as likely to be able to be of use to his friends as any other whosoever. Still, it may be worth taking into the account that I should, when my expectations shall be crowned with success, be in a position which might be occasionally, you know, of no slight advantage to one who had so materially assisted me."

"That also is true, and in such a case may doubtless be allowed to count for something," replied the jeweller gravely, but with perhaps the slightest tone in the world of sarcasm in his voice, as he added, "although we men of business, Signor Canonico, are not, to say the truth, accustomed to balance such very unknown amounts as gratitude against the known amounts of £ s. d. And I confess that I do not see very clearly how my poor and humble affairs could come within the sphere of your reverence's influences."

But, even as the old man was speaking, it suddenly occurred to him that the man he was talking with might be the very person of all others to be useful in the matter that was occupying his anxious thoughts when the canon entered. Intimate as he was with the Lunardi family,—intriguing, scheming, holding the confidences and the secrets of all around

him, as of course such a man wearing such a habit would do,—unscrupulous and enterprising as the jeweller knew him to be,—might he not be just the man to be able to assist him at need in finding some means of rendering a marriage between Sebastian Lunardi and his daughter impossible? All the father's meditations on the matter, after Marietta had left him, had tended to awaken no little misgiving on the subject. Although he repeated to himself again and again that it was not to be imagined that Laura could be guilty of any such absurdity, he could not get rid of a feeling that it behoved him to provide against the possibility of such a contingency, and to seek such safety from some other source than the mere exercise of paternal authority, if the regrettable case should ever arise of a difference between him and his daughter on such a subject.

Yet the fact was, if the hard old man had been capable of comprehending his daughter's nature, and the principles and feelings that would infallibly regulate her conduct, under the circumstances in question, that his authority and Laura's affection for him would have had greater power than he thought for; though not, perhaps, to the extent of imposing on her a marriage which she deemed forbidden by her allegiance to yet higher sanctions and obligations. But these were matters beyond the ken of the shrewd and knowing money-lender.

His thoughts on the subject were necessarily bounded by his own mental horizon; but they were, within those limits, prompt and decisive. And even while the canon was replying to his last somewhat caustic words, they grew into a purpose.

"Well!" said the latter, "perhaps you are right, Signor Giuseppe! You have a large experience, and doubtless your views are the fruit of it. Yet you know the old fable of the mouse and the lion. It might be that if not a canon of San Lorenzo, yet the chaplain and confessor to . . . ."

"Nay! nay! Signor Canonico, you mistake me," returned the jeweller with a courteous wave of the gold eye-glass. "Trust me I have sufficient knowledge of men and things to be aware that your old fable does not at all express our relative positions, nor the amount of possibility there might be that your reverence might, even without looking forward to what we hope for the future, have it in your power to render me assistance, for which I should be grateful."

Canon Guidi saw at once that he *was* needed for some purpose or other, and his hopes of a favourable issue to his business grew strong.

"If only I were so fortunate as that such should be the case," he said.

"There are cases," resumed the other, "in which the most valuable help a man can give his friend is his counsel. And I need hardly say that for sound advice there is no man to whom I could wish to apply so much as to yourself, Signor Canonico."

"And I trust, my dear sir, that I need hardly say how much flattered I should be by your calling on me in any case,—in *any* case, however confidential," —and here he directed a meaning glance, accompanied by a slight nod of his head, towards his companion ;— "in any matter, however confidential, in which I might be of use."

"The fact is," said the jeweller, "that it has

occurred to me, even while we have been talking, that there is a subject on which I *should* be glad of a word of advice from you."

This was accurately true; but the Canon Guidi, being a very knowing man, felt no doubt that it was a falsehood, and that the money-lender had been driving at this from the beginning of their interview. He merely bowed his head with grave courtesy in reply, and assumed the attitude of an attentive listener.

"The matter is, as you say, Signor Canonico, a strictly confidential one. But I know that I can trust you implicitly. If I ask your good offices, you, you know, may have need of mine."

Of course this was perfectly well understood to mean "I can trust you, because my compliance with your application for money will depend on your good faith." But the money-lender's spoken words were accompanied by a most graceful bend and an engaging smile, and were responded to by the priest in like manner.

"You may easily suppose, Signor Canonico, that my principal object in life is my daughter. She is my only child; and to see her well and judiciously settled is, I may say, all I have to live for!"

The canon bowed his acquiescence.

"Now I have some reason to think," pursued the jeweller, "I have, quite between ourselves, Signor Canonico, some reason to imagine, I say, that a common friend of ours, who, however estimable and honourable a person we both may know him to be, would not be considered by me a suitable match in all respects for my daughter, is inclined to pay attention to her .... ah .... in that point of view; .... in that point of view, you know!"

"Our excellent young friend, Sebastian de' Lunardi, you allude to, I presume, my dear sir," said the canon, nodding his head, as if he quite knew all about it.

"You were aware then——" cried Signor Palli.

"Of nothing more, my dear sir," interrupted the canon, "I beg you to believe, than what my own superficial observation, enlightened by the remarks you have already made, may enable me to guess."

"At all events, Signor Canonico, you have guessed right. Now you will see that such a marriage——"

"Quite out of the question! My dear Signor Palli, the idea would be preposterous. Why, the young man—excellent young man he is—has absolutely nothing, absolutely not wherewithal to buy his daily bread, if the life of his aged great uncle should drop."

"I felt sure that you would see the matter in that light. As a father, you see——"

"Of course! of *course*, my dear sir. But your daughter? Have you any reason to think——"

"Not at all! Not the least! And I have *every* reason to believe that Laura would have too much common sense to think of such a thing. But one cannot always reckon on a girl's mind, and it is well to be safe. In fact, I would rather not leave all to the confidence I have, though it is strong, that Laura would do rightly in such a matter."

"I see, I see, my dear sir! You are quite right. One cannot take too many precautions in such a case."

"Ay! but what precautions to take? That is the question. I am happy to think, you see, that there

is no such danger at present as would justify any such strong measures as might possibly—there is no knowing in these cases—produce the very evil we wish to avoid."

"Perfectly right, and very judicious, my dear sir. Permit me to think over the matter a little, and also to take a little time to observe these young people. Perhaps I may be able to be of some service to you —and them. You will allow me to call on you again, and——"

"You will do me a great favour, Signor Canonico! Meantime, I will think over that other matter, and I dare say we may be able to help each other."

The priest understood the terms of the bargain quite as well as if an indenture had been drawn up between himself and the jeweller. If he, Guidi, could be the means of putting an end to all danger of a love match between Sebastian and Laura, then, and on that consideration, the money-lender would advance him a sum of money of which he had urgent need for the prosecution of certain views of professional advancement, the path to which a golden key judiciously applied to the right lock might open to him.

"I trust it may be so, my dear sir. I will think over the matter. And now I will wish you good morning. I will call again. *A rivederla!*"

So the two gentlemen separated; and Signor Palli once again accompanied this second guest to the outer door of the shop, and bestowed on him one of his most magnificent bows at parting.

And the *Gobbo* Boccanera, two minutes afterwards, slipped quietly down from his ambush to his accustomed place in the corner of the shop.

CHAPTER XII.

WHAT CANON GUIDO THOUGHT, AND WHAT HE SAID.

THE *Gobbo* had overheard all the conversation between the canon and his *padrone*, but he was not very much wiser in consequence than he was before. A far smaller degree of observation and penetration than fell to his share would have sufficed to let him into the secret of Sebastian's love for his principal's daughter. And that the latter should be exceedingly opposed to any such marriage for his wealthy heiress was so much a matter of course, as to be no news to him. That the Signor Canonico wanted to borrow a sum of money, was nothing very strange nor very interesting. And that the jeweller might suppose that such a man as the Rev. Guido Guidi, intimate as he was with the Lunardi family, might have some influence in preventing such a marriage was natural enough. Upon the whole, the *Gobbo* knew little more than he knew before.

He was, however, somewhat struck by hearing the jeweller assert, uncontradicted by the priest, that Sebastian de' Lunardi would not have bread to eat if the old canon should die. He was struck by this,

because he happened to know that the Lunardi possessed the sum of 35,475 scudi. Now though this was, perhaps, no very large sum in proportion to the wealth of his employer, still—to talk of wanting daily bread!—*altro* * *che pane!* It would seem, then, reasoned the *Gobbo,* that the existence of this handsome sum was unknown both to the jeweller and the priest. It was rather strange that such a fact should be made such a secret. Who were the parties to whom the knowledge of it was confined?

But while the *Gobbo* speculates thus, the reader may ask, how had he become acquainted with Marietta's well-kept secret? And the circumstance may as well be explained at once.

When Marietta returned to her room after her night-walk through the palace, some days previously, and found the door open, which she thought she had left shut, her remembrance had not deceived her. She *had* left the door securely shut, and she did find it open on her return. There had, therefore, been an intruder during her absence. And that intruder was none other than the *Gobbo* Boccanera. The fact was that having on the preceding evening been engaged in copying the inscriptions in the Lunardi chapel (for the *Gobbo* was intently bent on making a collection of Florentine monumental inscriptions, and was in the habit of giving all his leisure hours to the work), he had by chance been locked into the little church; an accident which, when he discovered it,

* A common Tuscan exclamation. "Altro," or "altro che,"—other, other than, so and so, is nearly equivalent to "I should think so!" The meaning in the text would be, "Bread, indeed, I should think so!"

affected him very little. He had remained there very contentedly, amusing himself with endeavouring to picture to himself the life and body of those old times when the stone effigies around him had played their part on the living scene, till he had been disturbed by the noise of Marietta's key in the lock of the door communicating with the palace. He had seen her enter the gallery for a minute or two, and quit it without locking the door behind her. His first and most natural impulse was to address her; but a second induced him to watch all that he could see, without allowing himself to be seen.

Poor Sandro Boccanera was as honest-hearted and good a fellow as might be; wished harm to nobody, unless it were perhaps a little to the handsome Canon of San Lorenzo, and least of all to the Lunardi, and that especial object of his respect and admiration, the Contessa Marietta. But he was afflicted with an intense curiosity to know the affairs of all the people who composed his little world, and by a desire, if possible, to hold the power of exercising an influence upon them. It is a speciality of temperament which may be observed frequently to accompany the physical misfortune with which he was afflicted. Perhaps it is that the small possibility of exercising the power which all men love, by any more direct and obvious means, tempts such persons to seek the indirect influence which may be acquired by knowing what is sedulously kept from the knowledge of others. To the *Gobbo* Boccanera it seemed a very tempting thing to hold wires in his hands, by skilful pulling of which at the right moment he might direct, and in some degree rule, the movements of sundry tall and straight-backed men

and women. And as to any chivalrous feeling which should have taught him that there was something which he ought to have felt as dishonouring in such means of extending his information, it might as well have been expected from a red Indian.

So when Marietta quitted the church, and omitted to lock the door behind her, the *Gobbo* stole up the little stair into the gallery, watched her take her way from the terrace down to the colonnade below, observed the light of the lamp she had left at the bottom of the stair leading to the third floor, and had thus ascended to her room, with the locality of which he was perfectly well acquainted, led merely by curiosity to discover the meaning of this strange nocturnal excursion. Looking into the room he had instantly observed the loose sheet on the floor, and in a minute had made himself master of the secret of Marietta's hoarded wealth. That it was a secret from the canon and from all others he could not, of course, guess. But it appeared to his mind a very valuable piece of information, more especially as it surprised him greatly. And he stole back again to the church, highly contented with the booty of secret intelligence he had acquired.

There was exceedingly little danger that the secret should by his means be revealed to others; for the value of it to him consisted in being, as far as possible, the sole proprietor of it. And now the conversation which he had overheard between Signor Palli and the Canon Guidi proved to him, as he imagined, that it was not shared by either of them. And this circumstance, as far as regarded the canon, struck him as very remarkable.

Beyond this he had acquired little new information

from his eavesdropping in the little room over the jeweller's den.

Could he by any ingenious contrivance have continued his spying, so as to overhear the musings of the priest, as he walked home from the Ponte Vecchio to San Lorenzo, he might have surprised some more valuable secrets. But to spy the secret mind of Canon Guidi was an achievement to be accomplished by few, and far above the power of the Gobbo Boccanera.

"To keep that boy and girl asunder!" mused the priest to himself, as he paced thoughtfully homewards. "Humph! it might be an easier work to bring them together, despite that old fool, who has just found out what he ought to have known months ago. If one had only the boy to deal with! But, if I mistake not, the Signorina Laura, gentle and yielding as she seems, may prove of less malleable stuff. Would Marietta throw the boy over, and give up her game as lost, if the lad were to marry the old usurer's heiress? If so, that might be the better game. Thirty-five thousand scudi! What potentialities do there not lie in the handling of such a sum! But no! Not she! It would be a bitter pill to swallow; but she would swallow it. No! *that* won't do! If such a marriage were to be made, Marietta would tell the old man all, certain of his gladly smoothing all things by handing over the money to the boy. And then the game would be up as regards the thirty-five thousand scudi! Then as to the palace! The money would lose nine-tenths of its value in Marietta's eyes if the hope of obtaining the old house were gone. And she will never get it! These Palli brothers have eaten up Perini clean between them. They will not let the palace escape them; not they! It will never

come to an open sale; and if it did, a few thousand scudi, more or less, out of that old money-lender's coffers would not stand in his way. Poor dear Marietta will never have Palazzo Lunardi! Poor Marietta! Well! it is the way with all of us! We live for an aim, which recedes before us till the grave opens between us and it! But what of that? The pleasure is in having an aim to live for! *Andiamo avanti! Avanti!* * The Palli mean to gripe Palazzo Lunardi hard and fast! No doubt of that! But suppose Perini's final catastrophe arrive before the old man's death! And *per Bacco!* he may live till past ninety! Suppose the Palli should be the owners of Palazzo Lunardi, and every hope of ever repossessing it were gone to the winds, while the old canon yet lived, what would Marietta do then? Tell him the whole truth, and lay the money at his feet. Not a doubt of it. To be able to throw off the secret that has weighed on her life like an incubus, despite her high resolution, would be the sole drop of consolation in her disappointment. She would do it as sure as fate! And what would the old man do? Toss the securities, and the bonds, and the mortgages to his nephew, with a "Go, my boy, and be happy with the girl you love!" No doubt of that either! Yes! the worst of all would be, that Perini's final break-up should occur before the old canon's death. But how near is that consummation at hand? That is the question,—and one to which I must find the answer; no difficulty about that! That final break-up *must* not come till after the old man's departure. Means must be found for delaying it awhile; it can't be long; a year or two! Or, indeed, the other

* Let us go forward! Forwards!

thing . . . . . (There are suppressions even in our secret thinkings, as well as in our talk!) Ay! in any case, Perini must hold or appear to hold the property till the old canon is gone. Meantime, Master Sebastian cannot be allowed to marry Miss Laura! Neither the little game nor the great game will admit of it. And it is well that the same play, which may win the smaller stakes, in the shape of the so much needed advance from old Palli, is also the best on the cards for the larger object. No! no! my young friend Sebastian! We must put a spoke in that wheel! The boy is as weak as water! Suppose he could be rendered as incapable of becoming the progenitor of a line of Lunardi as I am of transmitting to posterity the name of Guidi! Ay! that would be the stroke to play! And it might perhaps be managed! Faith, the tonsure is a useful thing at times, as the world goes!"

And with that thought in his head the handsome Canon turned in at the door in the corner of the *piazza*, in front of the church of San Lorenzo, which leads to the cloisters of that collegiate church, and, ascending by the marble stair in the corner,—the same which leads to the celebrated Laurentian library,—pulled a key from his pocket and let himself in to his comfortable set of clerical chambers.

Seating himself in a luxuriously easy chair, in a very clerical looking study abundantly furnished with books, among which were many that had external appearances of modernness and a by no means orthodox or venerable look about them, he rang a little hand-bell, which was answered by a nice, cleanly-looking old lady, in a dress almost monastic in its appearance, from being composed entirely of black

and white. A nicely starched muslin kerchief was folded three-cornerwise over the back part of her head, leaving the broad bands of silvery-grey hair visible in front.

"Let me have my chocolate, Annunziata; give me a biscuit with it, and a glass of Vin Santo.* I have to go out again presently."

His reverence took his collation thoughtfully; drank his glass of Vin Santo after it, still apparently in deep thought; took a second glass, and then began to pace up and down the little chamber.

"I ought to be at vespers this afternoon," he muttered to himself, stopping in his walk opposite to a printed paper suspended against the wall; "I can't afford to be remarked on for negligence of such matters. But I should like much to set about the work I have undertaken, at once; and I do not know how I could fall in with the youngster so conveniently as by meeting him at the Duomo, when he has been with his uncle to vespers. I could then take a turn with him, and do my work by the time he wanted to meet the old man after the service. Yes! that must be it. Annunziata! I have need of rest. I will sleep awhile. Wake me before the hour of vespers."

The service called "Vespers," is usually performed very much earlier in the day than the name might lead one to imagine. It is an afternoon rather than an evening service in most Italian churches. So it was several hours before "the twenty-four," as Italians still call the hour of sunset, when the Canon of San Lorenzo met Sebas-

* The sweet liqueur wine, made from the choicest Tuscan grape, is so called.

tian at the door of the Duomo, as he returned from accompanying his uncle to the sacristy.

"Signor Sebastiano! Well met!" said the priest, accosting the young man. "To say the truth, I came here on purpose to fall in with you, knowing well that I should find you at your accustomed task. How wonderfully the dear old Canon wears!"

"Truly, he does, Signor Canonico!" replied Sebastian; "I see little change in him from year to year."

"And who should see it, if you do not, constant as you are to your task of accompanying him in his daily walk. You never miss it, I think. But it must be a great bore, having to be always at hand twice a day!"

"Not to one who has as little to do, alas! as I have. Besides, what would I not, and ought I not to do for the dear old man? What has he not been to all of us?"

"In truth, it has been well that he has had the means of offering the Signora Marietta and you a home, but that home cannot last for ever; cannot in all human probability, last much longer! And the fact is, my dear young friend, that it was a consideration of this certainty which brought me here to speak to you to-day."

"It is very good of you, Signor Canonico, to spend any of your thoughts on us. I confess that it is too painful to look forward to . . . . ."

"Of course, my dear sir, of course, it must be so! Yet it is absolutely necessary to look the future in the face. And as an old friend of the family, I have, I confess, contemplated, with considerable anxiety,

the prospect before my valued friend, your cousin Marietta and yourself."

"It is not a brilliant or a consoling one, sir, I own," said Sebastian, somewhat dryly, with a sigh which he could not suppress.

"I assure you," continued the priest, "that it is a subject which has often oppressed my mind painfully. But I should not have needlessly sought to afflict you by forcing it on your attention, and if I have done so, it is because an idea has occurred to me, which I think ought not to be dismissed without, at all events, laying it before you."

"Truly, your reverence is very kind. I have no means . . . . ."

"Nay, my dear boy! The tie which binds me to your family is older than you are. But now listen to me. The matter is shortly this. There is now vacant at Rome the place of Master of the Chapel to one of the richest conventual churches of the city. It is a position which would afford you and your cousin a comfortable maintenance, while it would give you ample leisure and opportunities for the practise and study of your favourite art."

"At Rome!" exclaimed poor Sebastian, in a tone which seemed to indicate that such a banishment from his native city did not strike him as altogether a charming prospect.

"Yes! at Rome, the capital of the world!" continued the other. "But such a thing is not to be had simply for the asking. The case is this. The community in question have always preferred an ecclesiastic for their Master of the Chapel, if they could get one; but as the services in their church are, perhaps, the best attended in all Rome, it is a

sine qua non with them to have a competent musician. Now it is not always an easy thing to unite these two requirements. You see, therefore, how it stands, *Signore mio!* Though I have no idea that I should have influence enough to obtain this appointment for a mere lay nominee of my own, against plenty of other lay candidates, I think,—and indeed I have little or no doubt on the subject,—that my recommendation of a good musician in orders would be gladly accepted. What do you think of it?"

"Really, dear sir, I don't know how to thank you for so kindly thinking of me—of us, and of our interest. But I hardly know . . . . it is so unexpected . . . ."

"Of course! of course! The matter requires mature consideration. There are difficulties in the way, undoubtedly."

"With regard to the possibility of obtaining the post you refer to?"

"No! not so! not that. I was thinking of your cousin Marietta. You know her peculiar ideas and views."

"But there is nothing that could be considered derogatory . . . ."

"Not in the least! Of course not! A position tenable by a priest in orders is always tenable by a gentleman. It is not that. But my dear and valued friend La Contessa Marietta, you know, would probably see with regret the destruction of all possibility of the continuance of the family by sons of yours."

"Poor Marietta!" sighed Sebastian; "she lives in a world of illusions!"

"Nor have I by any means overlooked the circum-

stance," continued the priest, "that many a man may have insuperable objections to entering a state which makes marriage out of the question. I have thought much of this."

"In truth," returned Sebastian, blushing painfully as he spoke, "I am, perhaps, hardly prepared to say . . . . at so short a notice . . . ."

"Nay! as I have said, it is a matter requiring much consideration,—mature consideration. May I take a friend's privilege," he continued, after a pause, "and speak frankly and openly to you on this subject?"

"You have, indeed, shown yourself a friend, my dear sir! I am sure it would ill become me not to hear with respect . . . ." faltered poor Sebastian, with painful misgiving as to what was coming.

"Frankly, then, my dear young friend, I am well aware that you have formed an attachment which is in every respect creditable to your heart and your understanding. In truth, one living as much among you all as it has been my good fortune to do, must have been blind not to see it. And others have seen it as well as I."

He paused a few moments, but Sebastian kept his eyes fixed on the ground, and said no word.

"Believe me," continued Guidi, stopping in his walk, and turning so as fully to face his companion; "believe me, my dear boy, I would not have come to tempt you with the proposal I have made had I not the means of knowing but too certainly that an union between you and Laura Palli can never take place."

A low groan, like that of one in bodily pain, escaped from the young musician, but he made no reply.

"It is but too clear, my poor friend, that such a marriage is and must ever be impossible. There is no extremity to which her father would not resort to prevent it. You would hardly wish to gratify your passion at the expense of making her you love a penniless outcast, bringing as her dower from her father's house only a father's curse. Then, again, you know how fatally such a marriage would afflict your cousin Marietta. Believe me, nothing but sorrow and misfortune to all concerned could come from an union between you and the daughter of Signor Giuseppe Palli."

Again the tempter paused awhile, and looked fixedly, and with an expression of pitying sadness, into the eyes of his victim.

"It is true! it is all true!" groaned he, looking up at length into the canon's sympathising face; "there is no word of all you have said that I can gainsay. But, Signor Canonico, it is a hard, and very bitter truth. Yet how could I ever have failed to see it?"

"It may be," continued the priest, divining the probability of an influence he might be called on to combat; "it may be that the lady herself, led into error by her affections, may have equally failed to see the matter as it really is. And if this be so, I am sure you would feel, without any need of my prompting, that the decision, which must remedy the error into which you have both fallen, should come from you. The devotedness of such a girl as Laura Palli would hesitate before no sacrifice. But it would be unworthy, indeed, of one professing to love her to permit her to consummate it!"

"True! too true! It is all true—all clear as daylight;—fool that I am, that I should need to have it

told me by another! Signor Guidi, I know that you speak the truth, and God forbid that I should be insensible to the considerations that you set before me. By God's help, I will strive to do rightly in this matter. I, too, am a Lunardi. And Marietta shall own that I also am capable of self-sacrifice after my own fashion for the honour of the name I bear. I will think of these things," he added, putting out his hand to the canon in a dazed and dreamy sort of manner; "and believe me, dear sir, that I am grateful to you for your kindness. I must go now. It is nearly time for me to meet my uncle, as he comes out from vespers."

"Go! my dear young friend!" said the priest, taking his hand in both his own; "go! and think over these matters, as you have said. I am sure you will do what honour and right feeling require of you. Rely on me as on a firm and sympathising friend. And remember, *Sebastiano mio*, that the man, who thus counsels you to sacrifice love to honour and rectitude, has trodden himself the steep and stony path he commends to you. Love as you may, young sir, your love is not stronger than that which I once felt for your cousin Marietta! But duty stood between us! And the sacrifice demanded by it was made."

"*A rivederla, Signor Canonico!* we will speak together of these matters again."

"And, Signor Sebastiano," said the priest, turning again, "the last words I spoke remind me that, for more than one reason, it will be best that you should not speak of this conversation of ours to the Contessa Marietta; for this reason especially, that the considerations I have been laying before you, and the similarity of the cases, would needlessly recall painful

recollections to her mind, and open again wounds never wholly healed."

"I will not forget your caution, Signor Canonico. Addio!"

So they parted, the older man well pleased, to return to his solitary home in the College of San Lorenzo; and the younger in the state of mind which may be easily imagined, to await his uncle, as usual, at the door of the sacristy in the Duomo.

CHAPTER XIII.

MARIETTA AND THE CANON OF ST. LORENZO.

IT was about six weeks after the conversation related in the preceding chapter had taken place, and Florence was in the full enjoyment of her summer-tide holiday. For in the City of Flowers it is holiday time when the *cicale** sing, not only because the heat counsels lazy rest, but because the absence of visitors from the "Etrurian Athens" causes a cessation of all the multifarious occupations connected with ministering to their wants, which make so large a portion of the business and work of the fair city. All the strangers, little guessing the delights of a Florence summer, have followed the routine of the fashion, and have gone off to baths, to the seaside, to the mountains, or to their northern homes; and Florence, half empty, is left to live her own life, follow her own devices, and enjoy herself after her own quiet *far-niente* fashion.

The Marchesa Perini is away at some fashionable bathing-place; and the great reception, which used

* The cicada, or tree-grasshopper. In the hot weather these insects fill all the air with a stridulous cry, produced by the action of a portion of their structure peculiar to their kind.

to make such noise and disturbance o' nights in the quiet quarter in which the Palazzo Lunardi is situated are over. The whole of the front first-floor windows are no more a blaze with light, from end to end of the palace. But there is one window belonging to a small chamber at the furthest extremity of the suite of rooms, in which a light may be seen on most nights, even till the early dawn puts to shame its pale, rakish, unwholesome looking glimmer. There is no throng of carriages at the door, but four or five guests—generally the same—may be seen to enter quietly about the Ave Maria, and to quit the grim old palace in the grey morning light. They are the Lunardi avengers:—a Russian prince, an English nobody, a Greek count, a German baron, or such like; a chosen band of friends, who do not permit the summer heat or the winter cold to interfere with the work, which is being carried on in the little room at one corner of the palace. The Marchese Perini labours hard, night after night, and wipes the cold sweat from his forehead, for Fortune still frowns, and "the luck" still, contrary to all the doctrine of chances, and to all that could be expected, continues to go against him. The Marchesa's applications for cash, from her summer retreat, begin to be very unsatisfactorily responded to; and there are sundry other symptoms that the avengers have so far at least done their work as to have well nigh ousted the Perini dynasty from the old palace, let the successors be who they may.

The process thus in regular course of execution on the first floor was too normal and ordinary in its nature to be worth any closer observation. Let us betake ourselves rather to the third floor, and look

on there at the anxieties, hopes, and fears set in motion by the anticipation of the approaching catastrophe.

Though it still wanted some hours of noon, the day was already hot; and the old canon, somewhat fatigued with his morning duty at the cathedral, was asleep in his carefully darkened room. Sebastian was sitting in the little closet, lighted by a small garret window in the roof,—fortunately in its northern slope,—which was his chamber, with a little bit of a table before him, just large enough to support a sheet or two of music and an inkstand, and a little piano at his elbow, which nearly occupied the remainder of the confined space. He was labouring at the completion of the score of his opera; and feeling at every pore that intellectual as well as bodily labour is carried on at a disadvantage with the thermometer standing at ninety in the shade. The success of the work on which he was engaged was, as he felt it, a matter of life and death to him. For his meditations on the conversation he had had, now some six weeks ago, with the canon of San Lorenzo, had resulted in a determination to let his answer to the proposal then made to him depend on the success or failure of his work. Not that the success of it could at all alter his position as regarded his hopeless love for Laura; but it might so far open such a prospect of the possibility of finding a maintenance for himself as would justify him, he thought, in declining the friendly canon's proposal, and thus escaping that final end-all—the submitting to the fatal tonsure—which was to shut out all possibility of hope for the future. If his opera was successful he would try yet another struggle with the world. If it failed, he

would give up the game, and accept the priest's offer. It was, indeed, a struggle for life or death that was going on in that little oven of a room under the roof. It was a time of painful, horribly painful anxiety for the poor young composer. And he was not one of those whose strength or whose vanity makes them sanguine, to whom success seems easy of achievement and failure not upon the cards. There were moments when his own work seemed so worthless to him,—so empty, flat, and poor, that he mocked himself with bitter irony for having ever dreamed that he had that in him which could achieve what should be worthy of admiration. But these were not the moments of composition. They were those of critical after-thought. Those hours of struggle and of creation in the closet under the roof were not unhappy hours. While Imagination and Fancy were busy in their laboratory, and the work of creation was in process, questions of success or failure, of the approval or disapproval of others, were forgotten. His work was no longer a means to an end, but was itself his sole end and object.

But then came hours of reaction from the excitement of the work, and all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and hope died within him. And of late he had had fewer opportunities of recurring for aid, strength, and inspiration to his Egeria. Since the conversation between Marietta and the jeweller on the Ponte Vecchio, it had somehow been brought about that there had been less intercourse between the two families than usual; and Laura and Sebastian had met but once by chance at the house of Simone Boccanera—honestly by chance—for though it would have been easy to have arranged interviews on that

neutral and yet friendly ground, as no declared and recognised prohibition to meet had been issued by the higher powers, there had not seemed any necessity for recurring to such a step. And besides, the perfidious appeal the false canon had made to Sebastian's feelings of honour in the matter of leading Laura into trouble and sorrow for the sake of his love, had had its effect. Partly influenced by these considerations, and partly by the moody and despairing melancholy which was overcoming him, and which he yet was conscious that he should be ashamed to manifest to her, he had felt more disposed to shun than to seek her.

Marietta, on the morning of which we are speaking, was in their small but pleasant sitting-room, and Canon Guidi was with her. The *Persiane** were closed, for the sun was beating full on the *loggia* outside, and the half-light thus produced seemed to be specially fitted for the confidential nature of the conversation that was passing between them. The canon was sitting in the large arm-chair usually occupied by the old master of the dwelling, near the window, but with his back to it, so that his face was almost in darkness. Marietta had in talking risen from her chair, and was standing with one elbow resting on the mantel-shelf, and her forehead leaned upon her hand.

The Marchese Parini, downstairs, was drifting fast to irremediable ruin, and of course *he* was not happy. Sebastian at his labour in the next room, was rendered temporarily insensible to his troubles by it, as by a dream; but *he* was certainly not happy. It

* The large and heavy green wooden blinds, with which almost every window in Florence is furnished, are so called.

would have been unreasonable to expect him to be so! But Marietta, one might suppose, ought to have been happier. The great object of her life, that for which she had lived with exclusive constancy for twenty years, seemed nearly to be won. For twenty years she had been striving to obtain money enough to purchase the home of her ancestors. She was now in possession of a sum more than sufficient for the purpose. The goal seemed nearly reached. Yet Marietta, as she had neared it, had become nervous, anxious, excited, restless, but by no means happy. In truth she had latterly become a good deal changed. While the aim of all her efforts was yet distant, she had plodded on with quiet, unwearying, uncomplaining constancy. The pale monotony of a joyless life, heaping up a pile of undistinguishable days till they had accumulated into the mountain of twenty years, had been borne with tranquil patience. She had been satisfied with the consciousness that she was, however slowly, yet unceasingly, moving onwards in the direction of her goal. But now that that goal was neared, now that the prize seemed almost within her grasp, a feverish and impatient restlessness had succeeded to the dull calm in which she had lived so long. Obstacles, possibilities, chances seemed to arise and present themselves to her mind, which she had never contemplated while the end was yet in the far future. The long-nursed hoard had reached the destined proportions, the only difficulty which she had considered as such in the earlier stages of her enterprise had been overcome; and still she could not stretch out her hand to receive the reward of her long constancy. Still baffling slips between the cup and the long thirsting lips seemed to threaten her, and make her

path, which had hitherto been clear and direct, if steep and painful, puzzling and uncertain for the future.

Had her life-long struggle been simply the fight with material circumstances, and the self-denial needed for the accumulation of the fund she required, —had there been no moral burthen calmly and resolutely borne, though never unfelt by the galled and cicatrised but still wrung conscience,—had she not been weighted during all her long course with the load of a secret, most carefully to be guarded from those she loved the most, she would not have been the victim of the nervous irritability which now assailed her. Ah! the weight of that well-kept secret! Could she but have dared to share it with those who were equally interested in it with herself!

Again and again at long distant times, she had essayed to feel her way, to sound the old man's simple mind, and judge whether she dared unload her bosom of the weight which so grievously oppressed her. Had she been able to decide on doing so, during the earlier years of her life beneath her uncle's roof, she might in all probability have succeeded in inducing the easy and simple-minded old man—not to participate in her views, for his nature was too differently constituted for him to feel or comprehend them—but to acquiesce in them. But later, as the secret became heavier to bear, it had become more clearly impossible to reveal it. For Marietta felt that nothing would have induced her uncle to sacrifice the happiness of his darling Sebastian to what would have appeared to him the whim of an unsound mind.

So Marietta had carried the load of her secret

burthen alone;—alone, save the participation of it with him, whom she had once tenderly loved in the days long past, before she had vowed herself to the superstition which now monopolised her entire being; —whom she still leaned on, but with a feeling more akin to fear than love; but without whose assistance and co-operation she would hardly have succeeded in accomplishing the results at which she had already arrived.

She had carried her secret alone, and had grievously felt the burthen of it. Was she conscious that it was the violence done to her moral nature which made the weight so oppressive? Had there been any moments of self-accusation, or even of doubt? Marietta might have laid her hand upon her heart and answered, with open brow, not one! Remorse had never been absent from her heart for twenty years. But at no moment had any gleam of repentance entered it. She had never *changed her mind.* That which she had thought good, desirable, and right at the moment when she had first conceived the idea of deceiving her uncle, she thought so still. At any given point in her long path, she would, had it needed, have begun it again anew. She truly and honestly thought that she was acting rightly; but she did not feel she was. All her intelligence approved, commended, and urged her on her path. The less easily erring heart rebelled. But intelligence suggested that the quelling of this rebellion was a merit the more. And all Marietta's ethics had taught her that when mind and heart are in conflict, virtue assigns the victory to the former.

But this virtue was not its own reward; and Marietta was not happy.

"What is Sebastian doing?" asked Guido, abruptly, after a silence of some minutes.

"Labouring at his opera, poor fellow, in the next room there. I have marked a change in him of late. He works harder, and with more constancy, but seems more oppressed and sadder than ever."

"It is that silly love affair, which, of course, is impossible, for a hundred reasons. And he, probably, is beginning to feel it is so."

"Poor Sebastian! I love him so dearly, and am so sad for his sorrow!"

"Did you ever before feel the same pity for another, Marietta?" asked the priest, looking up into her face, as she stood by the mantel-shelf, and speaking in a tone of sadness which contrasted with the almost cynical hardness of manner which was usual with him in his conversations with Marietta.

"I have felt it before now for two persons, Guido," answered she, speaking slowly, and with a cadence of melancholy and almost of reproach in her voice; "but I walked straight on then, though I was but a girl of twenty, in the path to which duty pointed, without stopping or turning aside to listen to the pleadings of pity; and I must do the same now."

"But something else may be needed this time besides walking straight on," returned the Canon, with a return to his sarcastic manner; "I have a notion that disappointment in this matter may lead the youngster to take some rash step, which would little suit your views and hopes."

"What is it you are thinking of?" asked Marietta, anxiously.

"What if he should do, even as that other youngster did, when duty forbade you to listen to your pity

for him in like case? What if he should fly for refuge to the covert of the cassock?"

Marietta started from her attitude of tranquil sadness, and gazed on the speaker as though his words had struck her speechless.

"Not that!" she cried, after a minute's pause; "anything but that! That would, indeed, be fatal! No! rather than that," she continued, after a further pause, "I would at once tell all, and give up the home to save the race. But can no better means be found to prevent so fatal a step? You are fertile in counsel, Guido. Tell me! Speak!"

"For myself I found no better counsel, when similarly bestead," returned the priest. "It may be, however, that we may find the means of averting such a disaster—at all events for a time. But despair is a counsellor difficult to argue against. And it would be well that the upshot should not be too long delayed. Well, for this reason; and, indeed, one way or another inevitable for another reason. The game is being played out quickly,—too quickly, perhaps, downstairs."

"Has anything new come to your knowledge?"

"About Sebastian?—Nothing new. I fancy the idea I spoke of has been in his head for a good while past."

"I have heard him drop a word to such an effect more than once, when he was more than usually disheartened and desponding, but never dreamed that he had any real purpose of the sort. Poor Sebastian! In any case *that* must not be. But I meant to ask if you had heard anything new about the affairs of the man downstairs."

"Only this;—that he must have very nearly reached the end of his tether. When I left you the

evening before yesterday, I met on the stairs two or three fellows going to their nightly work. I knew one of them by sight; . . . . one of those vultures who are rarely seen, save in the neighbourhood of a carcass which is nearly ready for the picking. And the others were birds of the same feather. The end must be very near."

"That is to say that the palace will very shortly be offered for sale?"

"It would seem so. Perini is assuredly an utterly ruined man."

"Very shortly," repeated Marietta, quitting the spot where she was standing opposite to the Canon, and walking across the room to a little sofa in the obscurity of the further end of it. She sate down for an instant; but getting up again nervously after a moment, she again crossed the room, and placing herself in a chair by the side of that of the priest, but so situated that the half light that came through the Persiane did not fall on her face, repeated, "very shortly! . . . . But do you not see, Guido, that the *how shortly* may become an important question?"

The priest paused a little before he replied, and then said, slightly pushing back his chair as he spoke, so as to enable him to see his companion's face, as far as the faint light would permit: "It would be difficult probably to ascertain, with any accuracy, the terms which he may be able to make with his creditors. If his creditors are men of the stamp with those I saw on the stair, no forbearance and little patience is to be expected from them. But we do not know exactly how he is situated. Only thus much is certain,—that the hour you have been looking forward to for twenty years has very nearly

arrived at length. Does its near approach alarm you, Marietta?"

"You speak of hours!" she said, almost in a whisper, while a sudden flush was as rapidly succeeded by a cold perspiration on her brow. "Gracious Heaven! Guido! Do you not see the difficulty?"

"Be it what it may, let us look it in the face, my friend," said the Canon, calmly.

"What if Palazzo Lunardi be offered for sale before . . . . that is, during the life of my uncle?"

"In that case the funds which you have accumulated at such cost of care and . . . . sorrow would be valueless to you. The labour of your life would be lost, Marietta . . . . . that is if, as you said some time since, you have made up your mind that it is impracticable to make the Canon a sharer in your plans."

"Utterly out of the question! Whatever it might have been once, it is, at all events, now that Sebastian's happiness,—or what he chooses to consider such,—might be promoted by throwing the money saved so painfully for so sacred a purpose into the coffers of that insolent money-dealer—it is altogether hopeless. If my uncle found himself to-morrow the possessor of a million, he would give it all to purchase the bauble Sebastian has set his heart on."

"The position is a difficult one, it must be confessed," said the priest, with a quietude of manner which contrasted disagreeably with the evident agitation of his companion. "Who could have anticipated that the extraordinarily prolonged life of your venerable uncle should prove the means of destroying so fair a prospect of restoring his family to their own position? It is a strange fatality!"

"Can it be!" said Marietta, sinking her voice almost to a whisper, and speaking rather to herself than to her friend and confidant,—"can it be, that I must come to be impatient for my uncle's death?"

"Never let the habit of deceiving others lead us into the more dangerous practice of deceiving ourselves, Marietta. I think that what you allude to has already come!"

"No! not so! I deny the insinuation, Guido. I do not desire that dear old man's death."

"You only desire that the palace may not be sold during his life? Is not that the distinction?"

"Of course, I wish—oh! how eagerly I wish—that things should continue as they are for the present."

"But since that cannot be .... since this wretched Perini has done his work quickly; since the good fortune which made a spendthrift gambler the owner of your ancestral home, rather than some other, from whose hands it would not have again escaped, has put the restoration of the Lunardi name within your power, provided you seize the golden opportunity, and since that opportunity cannot be seized till after the death of one who has lived ten years beyond the appointed span of human life, I do not see how it can be that his death should not be regarded as very opportune."

"God help me! For I am hard bestead!" groaned Marietta, nervously clasping and unclasping her hands as she spoke.

"Let us, at all events, see the matter clearly, my friend. No good can come from shutting our eyes to the reality of the circumstances, Marietta," he said, taking her hand in his as she sat beside him.

He felt that it was as cold as marble, and relinquished it, as he continued in a more gentle voice: "I think you are afflicting yourself unreasonably in this matter, my dear friend. You are not your usual self this morning. The nearness of the great hope for which you have lived and laboured has unnerved you. Let us look at the subject calmly, and above all truthfully to ourselves. We have two events to consider; the sale of the palace and the death of your more than octogenarian uncle. Both must shortly, very shortly occur. Should the former be the first to happen, all the aim and object of your life, and the reward for the sacrifice of youself . . . . and not of yourself alone, Marietta . . . . will be lost and gone for ever. Should the latter event precede the former, the dear hope of your poor father and yourself will be realised; the sacred duty to which you have vowed yourself will be accomplished; and by the constancy and courage of the Contessa Marietta dei Lunardi, the fine old family of which she is a scion will have been restored to its former splendour. Can it be, then, that we should not wish the second of these two events to occur before the first? And inasmuch as we have reason to think that the first will very shortly happen,—as we have no means whatever of deferring it, and as we are anxious that the second event should happen first . . . . why, I think that it must be admitted that we are impatient for it."

"Your logic is very cruel, Guido. It knows no inconsistencies. But the heart is often inconsistent. I would wish the sale of the palace to be further off, and not my uncle's death nearer."

"But if the sale of the palace is near, must be

near, and *cannot* be put further off," persisted the Canon, "must we not wish the other event to be nearer? And is there anything really shocking in wishing that a life so protracted should not be further prolonged till it last just long enough to effect such great mischief? Is it in any way reasonable to desire that all the prospects we have in view should be lost, for the sake of a few unenjoyable months to be added to the sum of nearly ninety years? Do you imagine that the old man himself sets so great a value on a few remaining days? Would your father have wished his life to have been continued at such a cost?"

"He would rather have died a thousand deaths. But my uncle is a different man. Yet I have loved him very dearly. And when I think of that mild and venerable old head, with its silvery locks, and cheery smile,—when I remember his simple pleasures, and his loving, trusting nature, it is horrible to me to think that I wish him dead. No! no! I cannot wish that!"

"You would rather that it should occur without your having consciously desired it! Do you not see, Marietta, that all these equivocations of the heart are unworthy of you, and of the great cause you are serving? Were the issues of life and death in your own hands, and were you anxious to act rightly, worthily, reasonably, holily, would you add a few months to such pale life as must be that of one who has lived four-score-and-five years already, at the cost of the ruin which must ensue from it to such a cause? Would you not close the shears on the fragile thread, which must so soon snap of itself?"

"I thank God that I have no such power to use,

no such choice to make, no such fearful duty to decide on! It is already horrible enough to me to be compelled, as you have been compelling me, Guido, to feel that it may be that his quick removal would smooth the way to the fulfilment of that which every most sacred duty binds me to desire with my whole heart. This, I say, is inexpressibly dreadful to me as it is. But I will not allow myself to wish his days shortened. It may not be needed. I will pray that it be not. I can but do my part, and leave the issues in God's hands."

There was something apparently displeasing to the priest in these words. An expression like a dark shade passed over his handsome countenance; and he rose from the large chair in which he had been hitherto sitting, and took a couple of turns across the little room, measuring its floor in three or four strides. Then stopping before the middle of the vacant fire-place, drawing up his fine and commanding figure to its full height, and folding his arms across his chest, he stood facing Marietta, who remained sitting in the chair she had taken, with her forehead supported on her hand, and her elbow resting on the table. After looking at her fixedly for a minute or two, he said, in a harder and colder tone than he had yet used,—

"You will leave, you say, the issues of this matter to God. It is the common language of those who have not the energy, the industry, the courage, or the virtue to use the faculties which God has given them to shape the issues of events for themselves. The words have a pious sound; and the weak and the slothful cheat themselves with them. But they cheat no one else; neither their stronger and better fellow-

men, nor the God whose best gifts they refuse to use. As regards the expediency of the prolongation of yonder old man's life, you say that you have neither power to use, nor choice to make, nor duty to decide on, in such a matter. But how stands the fact? Does the judge who condemns his fellow-man to the block, or the soldier who strikes him down in fight, find such to be the case? They have a power, and a choice, and a duty. They use the power, make the choice, perform the duty."

"I do not understand you, Guido. What question is there here of judge or soldier? I do not follow the sense of your observations."

"Are the judge and the soldier the only persons who have the lives of others in their power? Are they the only persons who use, and in every age have used, that power? Is not similar power given to most of us in the world?—a power to be used, observe, like every other, under responsibility for its due and justifiable use; under a responsibility grave in proportion to the greatness of the trust. Most men have entrusted to them power over the lives of their fellows. Most men are manifestly unfitted to exercise such power, and are therefore wisely forbidden to use and restrained from exercising it. It does not follow that all men are so forbidden and restrained; though human laws in their manifest and necessary imperfection can make no attempt at distinguishing the exceptions."

"Guido! What words and thoughts are these!" cried Marietta, almost breathlessly. "I do not understand you! I dare not think I understand you. Did God say only to some men, 'THOU SHALT DO NO MURDER?'"

"Beware, my friend," rejoined the priest, in a tone of lofty authority, emphasising his words with a warning forefinger as he spoke—"beware how you venture on the dangerous and forbidden ground of interpreting the words of Holy Writ according to your own unassisted judgment! See now the error into which misconception has led you. The law, 'Thou shalt do no murder,' is eternal, universal, and assuredly admits of no exceptions. But what is 'Murder?' To take life for the gratification of hatred and malice is to do murder. Even the thief, who kills for the sake of plunder, is guilty of the mortal sin of robbery, but not of murder, if he be void of personal ill-will towards the man he slays. Surely you have not now to learn that the value of every human act depends upon the *animus*—the intention with which it is done, and on the object proposed to himself by the doer. See to what sad confusion and dangerous blundering the sin of tampering with the Word of God by unauthorised and ignorant interpretations is sure to lead. Speak no more of murder. Malice and hatred, I trust, are little likely to have any part in aught that either you or I may in any matter think right to do or to leave undone."

All this was said with an air of lofty authority and domineering superiority, which beat down Marietta under the weight of it. She felt somewhat mystified, and understood herself to be rebuked for the presumption of quoting Scripture to a priest, with much the same reason as she might have been had she offered counsel to a sick man in the presence of a physician. So she answered humbly,—

"I have doubtless blundered and misunderstood your meaning in some way, Guido. Indeed, I hardly

know how all this talk arose; it seems to have no connection with the matters we were previously speaking of."

"I was only correcting you on a matter of fact, my friend. You said that you had no power to use, or choice to make, in the matter of your uncle's living longer or dying sooner. I pointed out to you that, as a matter of fact, your statement was incorrect; that was all. You know my habit of always looking at things, as nearly as I can, exactly as they are. You *have* the power you spoke of. Therefore I did not let you say, without correction, that you had it not. I said nothing of the expediency of making use of that power."

"God forbid! God forbid! But the idea dropped into my imagination by the suggestion is too horrible and too painful. I pray God that it may pass from my mind and my memory!"

An acute physiognomist might have read the slight shadow of a smile which passed over the handsome mouth of the canon of San Lorenzo, as Marietta spoke, to indicate a doubt whether the prayer thus fervently uttered would be granted. But he said:

"Be it so, Marietta! It is absolutely necessary, however, that you should consider well what steps you will take in the crisis which seems approaching. Meantime I will endeavour to obtain some more accurate information as to Perini's position, and the probabilities of the results it may lead to. Perhaps, when I next see you, we may be in possession of such facts as may enable us to talk more practically."

And so saying, the handsome and dignified ecclesiastic took his departure, leaving Marietta in no

enviable state of mind. She remained sitting in the chair, and in the attitude in which he left her, immersed, not so much in anything deserving to be called deep thought, as in an evil, dream-like sense of tanglement, perplexity, and difficulty, girdled all around by a vaguely perceived outer circle of horror, towards which her mind shrinkingly held back from all approach. And as often as she strove to concentrate her faculties on the practical consideration of the events that were hurrying forward to their consequences around her, the horrible phantom which the priest had conjured up and presented to her imagination, and which her exorcism had failed to lay, stood in the path of her thought, and scared it back for refuge to aimless wandering in the thick jungle of difficulties.

If it were only all a long time off! Ruined men often did go on inexplicably for years. Perini might have a turn of luck! A few years!—a year or two! . . . . One short year mayhap would suffice! Eighty-five! . . . eighty-six, indeed, in two months' time!—all but eighty-six! A great age, at which prolonged life could hardly be hoped. Impossible to deny that his death would smooth all difficulties! —Ha! was she wishing it? Was Guido right so far then? Nay, but to take in her own hand the distaff and the shears! to clear the embarrassed way by . . . horror! Back, back, unbidden thoughts from *that* road! What! Practise against that confiding and trustful old man's life! Become a murderess! There was madness in the thought. The hideous deed was doubly black from the very ease with which it might be done! Yes, easy enough to prevent that white old head from raising itself again from the

pillow—to dull the cheery twinkle of the dim but still kindly eye—to make the ruddy cheek livid! An unsuspected drug, so easily given by her hand, would do all this! And the death would occur in time to save all! What! was this temptation? Was the foul fiend tempting her? Was he even then snaring her soul? Temptation! No! Mere monstrous fancies, whose strange hideousness attracted the mind to dwell on them! Easy! Yes, 'twere easy enough! As easy as for the mother to stop the life that drew its nourishment from her own breasts!

"Are my hideous imaginings turned into legions of fiends swarming up into my mind? O God! Lead me not into temptation; but deliver me from evil!"

Marietta uttered the last words aloud; and, clasping her forehead with her two hands, and straining back the abundant masses of hair from her temples, she threw herself on her knees before the table at which she had been sitting.

And Marietta's heart prayed for the deliverance of which she had so much need, though with small self-consciousness of the prayers she uttered or of the Being to whom they were addressed. But it was not this time either to the Virgin or to St. Giacomo dei Lunardi.

CHAPTER XIV.

A DIGNIFIED ECCLESIASTIC; AND AN UNDIGNIFIED SPECIMEN OF THE SAME ORDER.

THINGS *did* continue to all outward appearance as they were, in accordance with the wish Marietta had so fervently expressed, for the remainder of the summer. Either Fortune had treacherously, as is her wont, suspended for awhile the sure progress of the Marchese Perini towards his doom, or his accommodating friends, the Palli brothers, had judged that the quantity of rope already supplied to him was not quite sufficient to ensure the satisfactory performance of the task of hanging himself; or the drowning Marchese had managed to find some temporary assistance by desperately catching at some of those straws which sometimes will suffice to keep a sinking man's head above water for a brief period. At all events, the end was not quite yet.

Marietta, however, seemed to have gained little from the reprieve. There are few, if any, ills in this world of which the ever-present fear is not worse than the actual presence. Night after night during that, to her, most miserable summer, she had watched from her "Loggia" the ever-punctual arrival of those

sinister guests of the Marchese, who were to spend the live-long night, as she well knew, in pushing on towards the catastrophe, to which she now looked forward with dread and horror. Morning after morning, as the old Canon came forth from his room, rosy, hale, and hearty, and declared himself to have passed an excellent night, and to be quite ready for his morning walk to the Duomo, horrible doubts, followed by agonising self-examinations, as to the genuineness of the gladness she professed in the old man's continued health, tormented her. Was it possible to shut her eyes to the fact, that the most paramount considerations required that his life should come to its term before the work being pushed on so rapidly down stairs on the first floor should be completed? Was she not bound by every duty to wish that such might be the case? Yet to be conscious that every pleasant word of morning greeting was a black and treacherous lie, to think that every sign of vigour and vitality the cheery old man manifested was unwelcome and odious, was too horrible and intolerable. No, it was not so! she would passionately repeat to her own heart. Could she wish any ill to the dear, kind, simple-hearted being whom she so truly loved, and had so lovingly tended for twenty years?

The troubled and perplexed contest, which was thus unceasingly going on in her mind, was very evidently undermining Marietta's bodily as well as her mental health. All the strong calm, which had been so characteristic of her life, was gone. She was excited, nervous, restless. Her cheek became habitually tinged with a hectic flush, and her large, dark eye hollow. If only by dying herself, she could have smoothed away the difficulties, and could in

dying know that Palazzo Lunardi was again owned by a Lunardi,—if by dying herself, instead of being compelled to watch for the death of another, she could have accomplished this, how gladly would she have hailed the change!

It was now about the middle of September, perhaps the most delightful of all the months in the year at Florence. It is still warm enough o'nights for any portion of them to be passed in the open air; and the days are no longer too fiercely hot to be agreeable. The Cascine woods are putting on their gorgeous parti-coloured autumnal livery; and the glorious sunsets are draping the sides and folds of the Apennine which makes the northern wall of the happy valley of the Arno, with a mantle of regal purple. Huge piles of water-melons, like heaps of green cannon-balls for monster ordnance, are seen at the gates of the city, waiting for the retail dealers, who establish in every corner of the city stalls, covered with an upholstery of vine-leaves, and adorned by a skilfully constructed background formed of the circular sections of the fruit. The happy significance read now-a-days in the bright green of the outer rind, the white of the intermediate flesh, and the ruby red of the pulp of the fruit within, had not dawned on Italy at the time of our story, or had a meaning which had been rendered odious to the peoples of the Peninsula. But, meaning apart, there was the same street decoration of pyramidical piles of the great, round, brilliant-coloured fruits then as now; and the grandfathers of the generation, who are now made happy in their hour of evening idlesse by a huge semi-circular slice of the cool and refreshing fruit, were crowding round the vendors' tables,

spending their "*quattrini*" in the same cheap luxury.

The days shorten at that season very rapidly in those latitudes almost void of twilight, and the vesper services at the Duomo and other churches had been altered to an earlier hour in the afternoon.

It was at this pleasant time of the year that the Canon of San Lorenzo, on coming back from his church to his comfortable rooms in the building over the cloisters, said to the old lady, whom we saw waiting on him on a former occasion,—

"Annunziata, I expect the priest of San Simone, who wishes to consult me on a point of theological difficulty. Bring a bottle of '*Vin Santo*,' some sweet biscuits, and a couple of glasses. And, while his reverence remains with me, let us not be interrupted."

Very shortly afterwards the expected guest arrived, and was ushered in to the Canon's presence by Dame Annunziata, who, as far as might be judged by a look she bestowed upon the visitor, as she quitted the room, did not deem him by any means a worthy recipient of the *Vin Santo* in the Canon's cellar. In truth the *curato* of San Simone was not a man of prepossessing exterior. And the two priests formed as strong a contrast in their persons as in the style of their dress and appointments. The Canon, as we know, was a model, not only of manly comeliness, but of a perfect clerical turn-out. The *curato* looked like a dissipated street-sweeper dressed up in the very dilapidated second-hand clothes of a clergyman. A stranger would have been perfectly astonished that a priest could go about the streets of a metropolitan

city in a guise so very disreputable. But Don Serafino was not much worse in this respect than many another of the cloth to be met with in the cities of Italy. He was miserably poor; and, unlike the almost entirety of his equally poor congregation, did not care to stint the inward for the sake of the adornment of the outward man. A Tuscan of either sex is almost always willing to do this; and the consequence is, that there is not a city in Europe which can show so decently and neatly clad a population, though the decency has often to be attained at the cost of submitting heroically to very short allowance even of daily bread. The clergy are an exception to this rule. Of course those who are well provided for rejoice in fine raiment as well as in other luxuries. But those whose means are scanty (and they are many, and were, at the date we are concerned with, more) generally prefer to provide sufficiently for the inner, before they think of the adornment of the outer man.

A very dirty, unwashed, unshaven, greasy, deboshed looking figure was Don Serafino; and he entered the comfortable room and the imposing presence of his more fortunate fellow priest with every mark of being vividly conscious of the great social difference which separated them.

The magnificent Canon, however, received his guest very graciously, placed him at the opposite side to himself of a tolerably large table, filled him a glass of "*Vin Santo*," set the bottle between them, carefully closed the door, and drew the curtain with which the doorway was garnished before it, and then at once proceeded to the business he had in hand.

"I was very glad to hear, from your note of this

morning, my good friend," began the Canon, "that you have at last succeeded in getting us the information we require. It is important, and I shall not fail to report your services in the right quarter."

"I humbly thank your reverence," returned the other, bowing low, as he sate; "the job was a rather difficult one, and . . . . "

"Did you ultimately succeed in getting what we want without directly asking for it; or were you obliged to instruct the girl to get at the facts."

"I feared I should be obliged to do so; but fortunately it turned out otherwise, and it came spontaneously."

"Much better so! go on: how did it come about? The girl you say is the mistress of the Marchese's valet?"

"That is it, your reverence, and she has been my penitent for years, indeed I may say ever since . . . . "

"Never mind that; come at once to her last confession."

"Of course I am to understand, most reverend Signor Canonico, that the revelations I make are for the service and advantage of the Church. The seal of confession you know . . . . "

"Of course! of course! we know all that. I have told you that this information is needed for purposes in which the Church is deeply interested. You need speak only of such parts of your penitent's confession as touch the points in question. The rest is, of course, sacred. Is the delicacy of your conscience satisfied?"

"Perfectly! perfectly! my most reverend sir."

"Very good! then fill your glass, and go on."

"I had urged the girl to press her lover on the subject of marriage, thinking it likely that that might lead at least to some mention of the circumstances we were in quest of; and in fact I was not disappointed."

"Very judiciously managed, my good Don Serafino. Go on!"

"Well, sir, when the girl spoke to the man on this point, it seems he alleged as a reason for not complying with her wish, or at least for deferring it, the probability that his present service might soon come to a conclusion. Here I saw that we were upon the right track; and as it was a question of repairing a sin and scandal by marriage, as your reverence sees, of course I could have no difficulty in directing her to obtain further information."

"Excellently well thought, and well said, my good friend. Your ability as a confessor ought not to pass unnoticed. Go on!"

"I thought it right therefore to refuse her absolution, till she should satisfy me that she had done her utmost to induce her lover to marry her; and directed her with this view to affect disbelief of his statement of the precariousness of his position, to require him to give his reasons for thinking it so:—and to bring me the result."

"Bravo! Don Serafino. You deserve to hear confessions elsewhere than at San Simone. Well!"

"Well! your reverence, the girl did her part to perfection; and out it all came. Her lover's place with the Marchese Perini was not worth six months' purchase. The whole concern was going to the dogs. The Marchese was a ruined man, as full of nails * as

* *Chiodi*, nails. Tuscan slang for debts.

a church door. But what reasons had he for saying all this. Could it really be true!—'So true,' answered the fellow, 'that I felt it to be my duty to myself to pay particular attention to a long talk there was here only last week, between my master and the old money-lender of the Ponte Vecchio. I tell you,' says he to the girl, 'he is regularly throttled.* ' "

"But did she get from him the details of the conversation?" asked the Canon; "that is all that is of any importance to us."

"Your reverence shall hear. I don't come here to waste your reverence's valuable time for nothing. The Marchese sent, it seems, for this Palli, who I find is a money-lender on the bridge, to get a further advance of cash from him. The *strozzino* objected that the Marchese had no security to offer. The latter spoke of the Palace. Palli swore he had already advanced upon it quite as much as it was worth. Perini disputed this, and protested that the palace should be publicly sold to ascertain what could be realised from it. This did not appear to suit the views of the money-lender: for after much disputing they agreed that in consideration of the sum of two thousand *scudi* to be paid down to the Marchese, the Palazzo is to become the absolute property of Signor Palli, if the amount for which it is mortgaged be not paid off in full within six months from the day in which a convention to this effect should be signed. 'And two days after,' said the man, 'sure enough came old Palli with his money bags, and a notary with his papers. And so my master with two thou-

* "*Strozzato*," throttled, *i. e.* in Tuscan slang, squeezed and strangled by usury, as if taken by the throat. A usurer is called a "*strozzino*."

sand scudi in his desk thinks himself as rich as the Grand Turk, and means to pay off all long before the six months are over. But I know a precious deal better than that. In six months' time we shall all be kicked out of Palazzo Lunardi as sure as eggs at Easter. And what is to become of us then, *cara mia,* if we go and get married?' And I think," said Don Serafino, in conclusion, "that that about includes the information your reverence was desirous of obtaining."

"Admirably well done, my excellent friend. A Cardinal's chaplain could not have managed the matter better. Trust me to report your zeal favourably in the highest quarter. You must not be left at that miserable San Simone. Come, finish the *Vin Santo,* and then we will both go to our important occupations. I dare say you find the day too short for the duties of it, as I do."

"Truly your reverence may say so! Day and night —night and day. I declare I think the people down at San Simone believe two or three o'clock in the morning to be the only canonical hours for receiving the last sacraments. They are always at it every night!"

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the sleek Canon, pleasantly. "You should teach them, my good Don Serafino, to show their charity towards the Church by dying at more reasonable hours!"

And so, after a little of such professional talk, the bottle of *Vin Santo* was emptied, and the Canon bowed out his dirty visitor.

"Now we know where we are, and what we have to count on," said he to himself, as he sat down in his great easy-chair to think over the facts he had just

learned; "and that is well at all events. For six months all holds on; and that is the end of your reprieve, my poor Marietta. Six months hence Palli takes open possession of the palace; and so ends once and for ever the romance of your life! Well, *that* is not my fault, at all events. I have no means of preventing it, if I were ever so anxious to do so. But before these six months expire . . . . something else must expire. Humph! Some *thing* else! Ay! that is the question! . . . . . But a very foolish one! For what is the use of questioning when one is sure to get no answer . . . . . If death be followed by a better life, of a surety the old man there is ripe and well prepared for it! If by a long sleep, is it any wrong to send him to his rest peacefully, calmly, painlessly, instead of leaving him to win his way to it almost as soon, but through pain and suffering? But it will be difficult to make Marietta see this! Strange, that even powerful minds are so enthralled by the common prejudices, which make the mental atmosphere in which their lives have been passed, that clear, unclouded reason is powerless to affect them! I foresee it will be a difficult matter to bring her to the needful point. And it is cruel to think of the disappointment awaiting her, when the deed shall have been done, and the mental agony which it will cost her shall have been incurred. Poor Marietta! I would fain temper this cup to thee, were it possible. But there is no other way. Sebastian in orders, the old man disposed of, the Palazzo finally gone for ever, and Marietta writhing and cowering—very possibly her reason tottering—under the consciousness of what will appear to her tortured imagination a horrible crime;—all gone, all fallen, crumbled away; the whole

edifice of her life-dream vanished even as a dream, nothing remaining after the wreck, nothing left, save the hard and solid thirty-five thousand scudi! and then I think I see my way. How infinitely worthless this laboriously-gathered money will seem to her then! And how humiliating to think that I must work to my aims by means of such dross,—that thirty-five thousand little bits of silver should be able to achieve what all the power and energy of this brain and hand could not achieve unaided by it! Well! we must use the tools that are offered to our hands. . . . . Six months!" continued the Canon, muttering to himself, as he walked, with his hands clasped behind his back, up and down his study, apparently in deep thought, pausing every now and then, with his eyes fixed on the ground. "Six months! We are now midway in September; our six months' grace will bring us to the middle of March . . . . . just the end of Carnival!—a very merry carnival it will be, I suspect, to some of us! Well, is it my fault if this best of all possible worlds has so arranged its affairs that one man's weal must needs depend upon his neighbour's woe? . . . . . Six months! There is plenty of time, but not too much for all that has to be done in it!"

And with that the handsome Canon brought his meditations to a close, and calling to Annunziata to bring him his reading-lamp, sat down to work on a little Latin treatise "On Papal and Episcopal Reserved Cases," on which he was engaged, and which was destined to contribute to the same end for which those bits of silver the learned divine was just now moralising on were also needed. Both were destined to serve, in their kind, the work of the Canon's eccle-

siastical advancement. And the book "On Reserved Cases," by the Bishop of Hippopotamos *in partibus*, has since become a stock book in the seminaries of the Peninsula.

CHAPTER XV.

LAURA AND HER FATHER.

THE information which reached the Canon of San Lorenzo, in the manner that has been seen, was as accurate as that gathered by similar means for the use of the vast joint-stock company, calling itself the Catholic Church, usually is. The terms of the contract concluded between the jeweller and the ruined gambler were exactly as the Marchese's valet had stated them. Of course, if Signor Palli had foreclosed on the mortgage, in the first place, the palace would have necessarily been put up to public sale; and in the second place, such a step could not have been taken for some time to come. Therefore, although it was on the cards that the property might not have produced more than had been already lent upon it, yet it might have brought more; and at all events Signor Palli would have been exposed to the competition of anybody who might take a fancy to the fine old house. The jeweller was well contented, therefore, to make the matter all safe and smooth at the cost of a couple of thousand *scudi;* and Perini would have consented to anything to obtain that sum in ready cash. As for the chances that the gambler would within six months be in a position to pay off

the debt on the house, and so escape from the toils, it never occurred either to the jeweller or to Canon Guidi to reckon that contingency at all among the possibilities of the case.

Signor Palli had returned home to dinner on the afternoon of that day, a week or so previous to the date of the interview between the two priests, on which he had concluded his bargain with the Marchese, in a very good humour. He was exceedingly well pleased with his morning's work, and was amusing himself with sundry schemes for the improvement and beautification of the old house, and flattering himself that he would be more successful in causing it to change its old name to Palazzo Palli than the present owner had been in supplanting the ancient name.

He fully purposed that the palace should make a part of the dowry of Laura on her marriage with her cousin. The young folks should establish themselves in the fine old patrician residence, and the money-lender and the *fattore* would enjoy the play from behind the scenes, but appear as little on the stage as possible. As for himself, he would have a modest room on the second floor; perhaps he would be more independent in the little apartment on the third floor, now in the occupation of old Canon Lunardi. He was getting an old man, and the *loggia* on the third floor was a charming spot for an old man to sit in and sun himself. Then he should be a good deal at Schifanoia. He would give up the business to old Simone Boccanera, and make up his mind to "*fare vita beata.*" *

* A characteristic Tuscan phrase, signifying a life of complete leisure.

So Signor Guiseppe Palli came home to dinner on that delightful September afternoon in a very pleasant frame of mind. He was rarely wont to be expansive to his daughter on matters connected with his business affairs,—or indeed on any others, for that matter,—being by nature an unexpansive man; but he judiciously made a point of leaving in his den on the Ponte Vecchio, if not all thought, at least all mention of the affairs connected therewith. On the present occasion, however, he could not forbear saying, as soon as he had swallowed a few spoonfuls of soup,

"*Figlia mia,* if I mistake not, I have made a good day's work this morning; and it is a matter which concerns thee."

"Concerns me! *padre mio,*" said Laura; "and what can it have been? Oh! I guess. You have sold the famous necklace, which old Simone and I spent so much time over. I know *maestro* Simone will take all the credit; but I protest the idea of the design was mine. And you sold it well, you say!"

"Never mind about the design for the necklace; you and old Simone may settle that matter together as you like. It is of other matters than necklaces that I have to tell you."

"Now, papa! you really do puzzle me. A day's work that concerns me! What can you mean?"

"Why does not every day's work concern you, as far as that goes, Laura *mia?* What do I work early and late and grow rich for, if not for you, do you think? Do you suppose that I have not got all that I shall ever want for any need of mine?"

"I should think so indeed!" put in Signora

Giuditta; "it is a small matter that folks of our age need, God knows."

"Yes! Giuditta, and I could manage to rub on with less than what there is," returned the old gentleman, who perfectly comprehended the intention of his *governante's* little speech. "Do you not know, Laura, that it is not for myself that I have laboured to grow rich?"

Now Laura, in truth, knew nothing of the kind; and though she should have been told that all her father's wealth was to be settled on her to-morrow, still she could not have blinded herself to the fact, that, if it were so, it would be because that was the mode in which most gratification could be got out of the money for himself.

Fathers are very apt to set up claims for gratitude from their children on grounds of this kind, which will hardly bear examination. The only way in which a money-getter, who has rusted all his capacities for enjoyment out of all possibility of using them, can still get any pleasure out of his hoards, is by attorneyship of the *alter ego*, his son. And the real whereabouts of such men's hearts may be ascertained from the determination they may ordinarily be observed to manifest that their gains shall be enjoyed by their heirs after the fashion imagined by themselves. When a father is ready to surrender his plans and notions as to the employment of the wealth he leaves behind him, in favour of the different ideas of him who is to possess it, then he may talk of gratitude, and flatter himself that his heart is not wholly selfish.

No such notions as these had consciously passed through Laura's mind. But she could not help being

haunted by a vague feeling that what her father wished was his own will and pleasure, and not hers. She thought it quite right that it should be so; was perfectly contented that her father should seek his own happiness and do his own pleasure; but there was an element of unbending truthfulness in her nature—an element which often depends in part on the nature of the intellect, as well as on that of the moral sentiments—which made the declaration that all his money-getting toils were for her sake alone, repugnant to her. So she only answered,

"*Padre mio!* I am sure that you always give me all, and more than all I need."

"But that is nothing to the purpose of my news to-day, *figliuola!* Some day or other you will want a home of your own; Eh, Laura? Well! Suppose I should tell you that I have bought a house to-day; a house which I hope soon to see you mistress of."

"Ah! I see! A doll's house you mean, papa. When will it be sent home?" said she, laughingly.

"I am not jesting, Laura. And it is no jesting matter, I can tell you."

"But I am sure, papa, that Aunt Giuditta will tell you, without any jesting at all, that I am not fit to be the mistress of any other."

"Fie! Laura!" said the lady thus appealed to; "What I should say would be to tell you to listen respectfully to what your Signor father has to communicate to you."

"I am sure, Aunt Giuditta, I am quite ready to do so. If I seemed less curious about the new house, my father speaks of, than I should be, it is only because we have been so happy and contented here.'

"It is all very well for you to talk in that way, Signorina Laura ; you who sit in the drawing-room all day like a Duchessa, with your bits of chalk and your pencils, and rubbish. But *I* know that the kitchen smokes to that degree that it will be a mercy of Heaven to be quit of it."

Now the fact was that all this little skirmishing on Laura's part, was simply an attack of pickets preparatory to the great battle, which she foresaw was threatened, on the dreaded subject of her cousin Nanni. She understood perfectly well the meaning of that word dropped by her father, about seeing her mistress of the house he had bought. And he, enlightened as he had been by his interview with Marietta, feared that he too understood her thus shying like a frightened horse at the first hint of the subject. So he said, in reply to Aunt Giuditta's observation, preparing himself on his side for a struggle, of which he was perhaps in truth as much afraid as his daughter,—

"If the kitchen chimney smokes, cousin Giuditta, it must be looked to. I was not speaking of anything which would lead to our quitting this house for the present. As to Laura, I cannot doubt, that with regard to her due and proper establishment in life, she will, when the fitting time shall arrive, show that deference and obedience to the wishes and counsels of her father which I expect from her."

The latter part of this speech was delivered with all the magisterial dignity which befitted such a *paternale.** The knife and fork with which the jeweller was discussing his *frittata* had been laid down, and the double gold eye-glass called into re-

* A *paternal* lecture. A Tuscan phrase for a reprimand.

quisition to emphasise each clause; and as he concluded the last phrase he placed the instrument on his nose, and sitting bolt-upright in his chair, without resuming his knife and fork, evidently "paused for a reply."

Laura, thus forced to accept battle, hoped that she should always be able to comply with his wishes.

This was said in so mild and gentle a voice that Signor Giuseppe was encouraged to think the present opportunity a favourable one for bringing his forces into line, and provoking the main battle—if battle there was to be. For he almost began to hope that there might be none.

"Able! Laura," he said. "Nay, it is little likely that I should ask anything from you that you are unable to comply with. And, in truth, what do I ask at all but what must evidently be for your own best interest and happiness. You must know that, Laura. Now listen, *figliuola mia;* the house I spoke of will not be mine for six months to come. It is a palazzo, which the proudest of our nobles might be glad to call their own; one of the real fine mansions of old Florence! I will tell you the name of it anon. I shall enter into possession of it in six months from this time. And my fondest hope is to see you and your cousin Nanni ready to assume your position as master and mistress of it."

"Alas! *padre mio*, when I spoke but now of my willingness to obey you in all I could, I own my heart misgave me that it might be just this that you were desirous of."

"Am I to understand, Laura, that you are perfectly ready to do as I would have you, in all points, except precisely the only one I care a straw about."

"It would be very painful to me that you should think so, *padre mio*," said Laura, with a deep sigh, looking up into his face for the first time since the beginning of the conversation.

"It is, however, very clear that there is but one way of preventing me from thinking so! Pray allow me to ask what possible objection you can have to the arrangement I propose to you? Is it not the most natural thing in the world,—my brother's only son, and my only daughter? Your uncle Carlo, let me whisper in your ear, is a warm man,—a very warm man. My own industry has not been unsuccessful. Is it not a good and reasonable object to make such an union as keeps the Palli property together? You must see this, Laura. Then your cousin Nanni is as likely a young fellow as any girl could wish,—a good lad, and one who would make a good husband. Is there anything you can gainsay in all this, Laura? Do you not know the truth of all I have stated?"

"Indeed, papa, I can gainsay no word you have said. My cousin Nanni is, I truly believe, as good a fellow as any in Tuscany, and . . . . "

"Once again, then, may I be permitted to ask what possible difficulty there is in the way of my proposal?"

Now it would have been easy for Laura, had she chosen to do so, to escape from her present position by suffering all the blame and the responsibility to fall on Nanni. But this would have been in contravention of the terms of the understanding come to by the two cousins in the course of that afternoon walk along the shrubberies of Schifanoia, now some three or four months ago. When upon that occasion, from

Laura's initiative, she and Nanni had, after some little beating about the bush, come to a frank mutual understanding, and had finally determined on rebellion against the parental decrees, which destined them for each other, it had been agreed that each was to take his and her fair share in the difficulties and dangers to which that rebellion might give rise. Neither party was to escape at the expense of the other. Laura was not to get off by protesting that she was willing if Nanni were only equally so; and Nanni was not to excuse himself to his father by declaring that Laura would not have him. Such were the terms of the contract; and now Laura was determined to observe them honourably.

So she was obliged to answer her father's direct attack by saying:

"Indeed, father dear, I can give no other reason than the simple one, I do not love my cousin well enough to wish to marry him. I have a great regard for Nanni, I *do* love him as a cousin . . . . . but I could not love him as a husband."

"Mere girlish nonsense; as old as the hills. All the girls talk in the same strain; but reasonable marriages are made all the same; properties are kept together, family interests are looked after, and no hearts are broken that I could ever see. No! Look you, Laura, there is only one real reason which would make a girl persist in resisting such an establishment as I have been proposing to you. That is," —and here he looked across the table hard and sternly into her eyes,—"that is, a fancy for some other person. I trust that at least you have not suffered yourself to be inveigled into any such folly and indiscretion."

"I feel sure, dearest father, that you are mistaken in this," replied Laura, somewhat jesuitically avoiding her father's question. "I am sure that very many women would far rather continue single than marry one whom they did not love with a very different sort of love from that which I feel for my cousin."

"Still you do not answer my question, Laura," said her father, with increased sternness.

Thus driven to bay, Laura remained silent for a minute, while a deep blush covered her neck, and cheeks, and forehead, and her eyes were bent upon the table. But at the end of that pause she looked up, and, though still blushing, said calmly,—

"There are some points, *padre mio*, on which one's heart, I think, ought to be left to one's own private examination. It is often difficult enough to get to understand it clearly even one's own self. Very often it would not only be painful, but impossible to give to another, even to a father, an accurate and truthful account of its feelings."

"I should like to know," returned the old man, sarcastically, "whether I am right in translating all that trash to mean that you are determined to walk off with the first beggar that may happen to suit your fancy, without consulting your father or any one else? Because, look you, Laura! in that case, I have an observation or two to make respecting *my* feelings, which, you may depend upon it, I for my part understand perfectly clearly. I do not intend that the wealth which I have earned by the steady industry of a long life of labour should be thrown away to enrich some scheming noble beggar, who would kindly consent to take my daughter off my

hands for the moderate consideration of inheriting all I possess."

"Believe me, my father," said Laura, flushing, and raising her head with a proud movement, "no such event is in the least likely to happen."

"Very good!" replied her father, coldly; "but if you will permit me, my daughter, I prefer to state the matter in somewhat stronger terms. No such event,—no event, mark me! which I should consider such,—*shall* under any circumstances happen. Now, listen to me for a moment! You have been my object, and your welfare my aim, through life! It is for you that I have toiled late and early; for you that I have heaped up wealth. Is it not evident to you that such is the truth? Do I want it? Do I use it? I eat simply, drink simply, live simply. All my wants are supplied for a small sum. But I have laboured, and continue to labour, to conquer a different place in the world for you than that which I have occupied. I would have my daughter among the first instead of among well nigh the last in the land. Does it seem to you, Laura, that all this demands no return of gratitude? Does it seem to you well to overthrow for a caprice the hopes and plans of a lifetime? Is all my care for you, all my ambition, not for myself, but for you, to be requited only by disappointment and sorrow?"

It was very rarely that anything approaching to interchange of feeling, demonstration of affection, or words of tenderness, passed between the jeweller and his daughter. She had always been treated indulgently, all her wants abundantly supplied, all her wishes—they were never other than modest and easily gratified—complied with.

But it is a great mistake to suppose that such treatment, which is compatible with utter estrangement of heart, can ever stand in the place of community of feeling and loving companionship. Love can be purchased only by love. No amount of benefits conferred, except in so far as they may be received as evidences of love, will obtain it. They may obtain the gratitude of the mind, not the love of the heart. And least of all can the natural supply of all a child needs at a parent's hands—supplies, which come to it as naturally as the breath of life comes to its lungs—be expected, despite all the well-meaning nonsense which our household words are full of on the subject, to be rewarded with the affection which never pays any debts save those in kind.

Yet Laura loved her father far better in reality than he loved her. For hers was the richer nature, and had more to give. But it was the spontaneous love of a gentle heart for that which was nearest to it, nourished rather by what it gave than by what it received; by all the little cares and household tendings of every-day occurrence, and not in any smallest degree by the bribe of an enormous heritage. The jeweller's appeal therefore failed to strike the responsive chord in his daughter's heart at which it was aimed. But not so the mention of his sorrow and disappointment. The notion of causing him affliction was very painful to her; and, after a minute's pause, raising her eyes sadly to his face, she said,—

"If the sorrow and disappointment you speak of may be remedied, dearest father, by my assurance that I will never marry any one without your consent, I can freely give it to you."

Laura spoke calmly and firmly, though sadly. The

promise she offered to her father was no result of the conversation then passing between them. The meditations on the subject which had followed the mutual avowal of her and Sebastian's love for each other, had long since led her to this conclusion. No authority or compulsion should force her into a marriage not of her own choice. But neither would she, on the other hand, so far defy her father's authority and disregard his wishes as to give her hand to any man without his consent.

Such a promise was more than her father had in his inmost heart expected. He knew right well that he might implicitly trust it, and he most gladly accepted it. Acting, however, on the same principles which would have guided him in his dealing with a debtor who came unexpectedly to pay an instalment on a debt, long since booked as a bad one, he only said,—

"So far, so good! But that does not tell me, Laura, that you will do as I would have you in this matter."

"Even if it should ever come to pass," returned Laura, "that my happiness should seem to me to be involved in making a marriage to which unhappily I should not be able to obtain your consent, my father, I would, as I have said, sacrifice that happiness rather than act in disobedience to you. But I cannot promise to carry obedience so far as to consent to act in direct opposition to a higher law than even that of a father. I cannot marry against the dictates of my heart. Let us make this compromise, my dearest father. Do not urge me to act in this matter against my inclination and my conscience, and I will never yield to my inclination against your wishes. Dear father, be content with this!"

"I have said—so far, so good, Laura," replied the old man, rather doggedly than fiercely. "I will not yet believe but that you will see reason to change your mind about your cousin."

And so the father and daughter separated, the former to return to his spider's hole on the Ponte, and the latter to meditate on the means of bringing her father to accept Sebastian as a son-in-law. For though Laura had not the slightest intention of ever breaking the promise she had given her father, she by no means gave up the hope and expectation of obtaining his acquiescence at last in the only marriage she could ever consent to make.

And thus the information as to the arrangement about Palazzo Lunardi, which the jeweller had been on the point of communicating to Laura, remained untold; and the results that would probably have arisen, from her knowledge of these facts, to change the course of subsequent events, remained in the great category of things that might have been.

CHAPTER XVI.

MARIETTA FIGHTS A HARD BATTLE.

IT was rarely that many days had passed during the last twenty years without a visit from the Canon of San Lorenzo to the apartment on the third floor in the Palazzo Lunardi. In the course of all these years his confidential intimacy with Marietta, and the share he had taken in the great task of her life,—the amassing of the hoard destined to the re-acquisition of the palace,—had made these visits natural, and almost necessary. The great work could hardly have been accomplished, as far as it was accomplished, without his aid. The mere putting aside of her yearly savings into a box, however safely guarded, would not have sufficed by a great deal to raise the accumulated treasure to the amount it had now reached. In continually investing the money to the best advantage, Guido had exercised a faithful and exceedingly intelligent stewardship. And the talk, and consultations, and speculations, arising from this subject of interest, had been the constant subject of their conversation. Then, again, there were the musical meetings of the old Canon; so that, what with one thing and the other, a week in which the little family on the third floor did not see Canon

Guidi was an exceptional thing in their quiet and monotonous lives.

The work, however, as far as skilfully putting penny and penny together could accomplish it, was now well-nigh done. The hoard had reached the goodly proportions judged to be sufficient for the purpose in view, and the now-or-never for the attainment of that purpose was near at hand. In these circumstances Guido Guidi was not the man to allow the influence, inevitably acquired by the part he had played in preparing for the *dénouement*, to be diminished for want of assiduously keeping it up. Having presided over the accumulation of thirty-five thousand scudi, he was not at all inclined to lose sight of that creation of his care and clever management.

Nevertheless, a week, from the day on which he had acquired the information the reader is acquainted with from the priest of San Simone, went by without his returning to Palazzo Lunardi. He had promised Marietta to obtain for her the information which he was now in possession of from a sure source; and he fully intended to communicate to her a part—not all, of what he had ascertained. Yet he did not hasten to do so.

Was it that he had not fully made up his mind as to his own intended course of action? Was it that he wished to give Marietta time to forget some of the impressions he had made on her at his last visit before seeing her again? The Canon Guidi was not one of those men who are apt to be long in determining on their conduct, when the grounds of action are once known to them, or who, when they have decided, vacillate in carrying their intentions into

execution. Nor was it, on the other hand, likely that the Canon should imagine that there was any possibility that the words which had fallen from him at his last interview with Marietta would ever be forgotten by her. She had breathed a fervent prayer that her mind might be cleansed from the remembrance of them; and he had echoed her prayer with a meek and sympathising "Amen." But there might have been detected, by a sharper observer than poor Marietta, a certain smile on his lip, unshared in by his eye, as he uttered the pious word, which would not have seemed to a skilled reader of the human countenance to imply either an expectation or a wish that the prayer he professed to join in should be granted.

When the Canon Guidi sowed seed, he usually did so with the expectation and intention that it should produce its crop duly in kind. And the words he had dropped on that occasion into Marietta's mind had been seed assuredly intentionally sown. He knew right well that few minds, if any, have the power of rejecting at will idea-seed once sown on their surface in well-chosen time and season. He knew that the mind's surface is, under such circumstances, absorptive to a wondrous degree of activity —that the idea-seed is then swallowed in as soon as scattered—that germination infallibly follows—and that, let the ensuing growth of weeds be plucked up and cast out as often and as perseveringly as they may, a tap root of them will yet remain, ever sending up new shoots, and only by long-continued and repeated efforts, if ever, to be eradicated.

And we should probably be doing more justice to the able Canon's character, if we conclude that his

week's absence from the Palazzo Lunardi was intended by him to give time for the effects of his last conversation there—not to be forgotten—but to operate according to their kind. And if these had been his intentions and expectations, he had not been deceived in them.

Not that it is to be supposed that the dark hints and abominable theories of the subtle priest had made any progress towards bringing Marietta's mind into conformity with his own on the subject, or inducing her even to contemplate the possibility of her consenting to perpetrate the atrocity suggested to her. But he knows little of the action of the nervous system, who does not comprehend that, short of this, her mental condition might be very strongly and prejudicially affected by the poison dose that had been administered to it.

The undeniable fact of the desirability of her beloved uncle's speedy death, for the success of her long and dearly-cherished hope, had been kept constantly before her mind. And the constant struggle to keep this in the background of her thoughts, which had of course the certain effect of retaining it conspicuously in the van of them; the unavailing effort to prevent it from horribly and odiously obtruding itself every time her eye rested on the ruddy, hale cheek of the old man, and took note of the green vigour of his age; the dreadful conviction that seemed to force itself upon her with increasing irresistibility as the days ran on, that the old man's strength and health would ruin all her hopes: all this kept her mind in a continually feverish state of nervous excitement, which, if continued long enough, would probably have ended in madness. Then the

mere lapse of time, gliding on fast and unceasingly towards the inevitable, while she remained in ignorance of what each day was bringing forth, added much to the mental fever which was consuming her. Why did Guido leave her so long without communicating any of the information he had promised to seek? She had felt his departure a great relief when he had left her alone at the conclusion of his last visit. But now she was painfully anxious for his return. She felt as if, left there in that quiet, monotonous home, the most important events might be consummated while she was kept from all knowledge of them. In short, the week of Guido's absence had been passed by Marietta in a state of restless misery and anxiety, tending as surely to weaken and injure the moral tone of her mind, as it did to wear out and fever her body. She dreaded the Canon's coming, but yet expected it with the sick impatience of irrepressible longing.

At length he came.

He chose for his visit the hour at which he knew that the old Canon would be taking his siesta after his dinner, before setting forth on his evening expedition to vespers.

Marietta was alone in the little parlour, sitting at the open window, from which the morning sun had passed away, and gazing vacantly on the far blue line of the Vallombrosan hills. She rose to her feet with a start as the priest entered, but immediately reseating herself, and pressing her hand to her bosom, gasped out:

"What news have you? Thank God you are come, Guido! Tell me quickly!"

"My dear friend!" replied the priest, calmly;

"you agitate yourself needlessly! Why should you suppose that I have any news to tell you?"

"Did you not go hence, promising me that you would ascertain the time . . . . . the time that remains! . . . . . Oh! God! that it should come to this! Speak, for Heaven's sake! What time have we?"

"Really, my dear Marietta, your anxiety for the conclusion of this business excites you unreasonably!"

"Guido! did you not tell me . . . . show me that things were urgent? Have you found out nothing?"

"I come to tell you the result of my inquiries. As far as my information goes, I believe it may be depended on; but I have no news—we knew before that the time must be short!"

"Speak, Guido, quick! How much time?"

"I have reason to believe, Marietta, that the palace will be sold by the creditors of the Marchese at the expiration of six months from the present time!"

Marietta's first sensation on hearing this was a feeling of relief. So continually had her mind been dwelling on the nervous dread which had been oppressing her, that the catastrophe was hurrying onwards to its completion, that six months seemed a long reprieve.

"Six months!" she said; "six months! I had feared it might have been sooner! We have half a year then before us safe?"

"And many things may happen in half a year, as your thought is now suggesting to you, my friend."

Marietta was conscious that the tingling blood

mantled in her cheeks, as he finished speaking, but she only said in reply:

"And you think that this information may be depended on, Guido, without the chance that matters may be changed by any fresh act of the Marchese?"

"You may receive the intelligence as certain, Marietta. The affair no longer depends on the Marchese. The palazzo is to be sold this time six months. And observe, Marietta, I did not only say that it will not be sold before, but it assuredly will be sold at that time."

"In six months!" repeated Marietta, thoughtfully.

"Yes! in six months. That will bring the time just about to the end of Carnival. How is my old friend this morning?"

"My uncle is well;" said Marietta, without venturing to raise her eyes to the face of her companion.

"Ah! in his usual health, I suppose. It is long since he has had any illness whatever, is it not?"

"It is several years since he had anything of consequence the matter with him," answered Marietta, feeling an irritation against her questioner which she could hardly suppress the outward manifestation of.

"It frequently occurs, however," said Guido, slowly, and looking straight into the eyes of Marietta as he spoke, "that lives, apparently so vigorous and untouched by malady are ended quite unexpectedly to those around the patient, and most favourably and fortunately to himself."

"It may be so! But I would rather avert my mind from any such event as that to which you

seem so perseveringly determined to direct it; and let it rest upon the certainty that I need not even think of the subject for the next six months."

"Need you not? Excuse my importunity, Marietta, if I suggest that if you put off all present consideration of the matter, consideration may be altogether useless when the moment for action shall have arrived."

"Gracious Heaven, Guido! What is it you would have me do? What consideration of mine can avail aught in the matter? Even if you should succeed in compelling me to feel that I wish that the death of that unsuspecting old man may befall before six months are past and gone, what besides my misery and anguish of mind would be gained by doing so?"

"When last we spoke together on the painful parts of this subject, Marietta, and I felt it to be my duty to point out to you the means at your disposal for the accomplishment of the solemn task to which you have devoted yourself, and for the execution of which you have pledged yourself to the dead, you prayed that my observations might pass away from your mind. Your prayer was an earnest one, and, had it been a fitting one, it would doubtless have been granted. It has not been granted. The considerations I then laid before you have *not* passed away from your mind. Am I not right in saying so, Marietta?"

"Spare me, Guido!"

"I would fain spare you an undying remorse, my friend—far, far more intolerable than the torments of your present vacillations."

"Vacillations, Guido! Great Heaven! Has it

come to this? I protest and swear no shadow of a vacillation on the subject of the horrible idea you scared my soul with has ever passed across my heart or brain!"

The priest, looking down into her upturned eyes, —for he had now taken his former place, with his back to the chimney-piece, and Marietta was sitting on a low chair near the table opposite to him,— smiled the compassionate smile of superior knowledge, and slowly shook his head, while with the vibratory motion of one raised forefinger he made the significantly expressive Tuscan sign of negation.

"Had you indeed succeeded," he continued, "in casting from your thoughts the ideas which I then laid before you, I should have been unwilling to pain you by again referring to them, because I should have known, in that case, that it would have been fruitless to do so. But as I perceive that you have given them much meditation, I think it may help to enlighten your mind upon the subject, if I remind you of the position you will stand in, supposing you fail to accomplish your object."

"Spare me, Guido! What could I have done?"

"Nay, but Marietta, you have done too much to permit of your halting short of the goal. There are causes of action which success, and success only, can justify. To rehabilitate the noble line of your forefathers, to fulfil the life-long object and dying wish of your father, was an object the holy nature of which abundantly justified the means you have taken to obtain the funds needed for the purpose. But failing in that object,—and that by your own weakness,—how do you stand with regard to the money you have thus gathered together? You have wronged

your uncle of the sum! The curse of ill-gotten wealth would cleave to the money! Falling from the position of a heroine, the martyr of a hallowing purpose, you sink to that of the false steward who robs his master! This money put to its appointed use makes your name the noblest among the recorded ladies of your race: unconsecrated to that end it damns you to the infamy of being the first that ever disgraced the Lunardi blood!"

Poor Marietta's confessional-trained conscience failed to see through the transparent sophistry of all this; and the well-aimed bolt went home to her heart. Flinging herself forward on the table, she hid her face in her hands. She moaned aloud, as the priest stood carefully watching the working of the poison he had been administering. Presently she said, in a low voice,—

"Go now, Guido, my head is whirling, and my brain is on fire. Leave me awhile, that I may strive to think, if that be yet possible to me. Go, Guido; but come again soon. You make me fear you horribly, but do not let me remain days alone,—alone with my thoughts, for I can speak to no one but you!"

"I leave you, then, Marietta, for awhile. I will return, and hope that your mind may be able to look at these matters in their true light, and calmly. Trust to my friendship, Marietta, to lead your conscience aright. We will talk of this again shortly. Adieu, for the present."

And the priest, passing her as she lay with her face prostrate on the table, smiled triumphantly as he left the room.

Marietta remained in the position in which the

Canon of San Lorenzo left her, striving to bring the surging chaos of agonizing thoughts, which had been presented to her mind, into some degree of subjection to the powers of her reason,—and striving very unsuccessfully,—till she was roused by her uncle, who had waked from his siesta, coming into the room. She sprang up to meet him, and was at once struck by an absence in his look and manner of the cheery brightness of health usual to him. He seemed flushed and unrested by his sleep, and his eye was heavy.

"Do you feel unwell, uncle? You are not looking like yourself after your nap this afternoon!" said she, as taking his hand tenderly she placed him in his easy chair. There was no shadow of a taint of hypocrisy in the tenderness of her act and accent, for she loved the old man dearly. But some devil prompted in her heart the consciousness of a speculative curiosity as she marked narrowly the fever flush on his cheek; and oh! how loathingly Marietta hated herself at that moment for the thought, that would uprear its hateful head.

"I don't feel quite well, dearest," said the old canon. "My head aches a little. But I dare say it is nothing to signify. A little touch of indigestion probably!"

"But you look fevered, dear! Heaven grant that you are not going to be seriously ill!"

And Marietta blushed painfully over all the neck and face as she spoke the words, and struggled hard to shut her mind against the suggestion, which would make them traitorously false.

"No, no! I think not. I dare say I shall be better this evening. My walk to vespers will do me

good. But Marietta, darling," the old man continued, taking her hand, as she hung over him, and looking up into her face, "Eighty-six years make a complaint from which one must not expect to recover,—save by one way. A small matter will shake over-ripe fruit from the tree, you know."

"But still, such health as yours, uncle . . . . Nay, nay, we are not going to lose you yet!"

"Well, darling, I hope not. I am ready, but in no hurry to go. And I am sure, if care and love can keep an old man alive, you will keep me with you."

"And you enjoy life, do you not, uncle?"

"Oh, yes! I am well content to live as long as God pleases. But, as I said, I am also content to go; —or should be so, dearest, but for your sake. I do hope I may live till our dear Sebastian is in a position to give you a home, my Marietta!"

"Dear uncle!" Marietta murmured, as her eyes filled with tears.

"You see, *Marietta mia*," continued the old man, "there is so much that dies with me. That is the worst of it. And I often blame myself, my dear child, for not having contrived in the course of such a long life to lay by some provision for you afterwards. But Heaven help me, I was never good at such matters. I trust that Sebastian may do well yet. He has plenty of talent. Trust me, Marietta, that boy has talent enough to make his way. But I would fain live a year or so longer, till he has got his foot on the ladder, for your sake, my own darling."

"God bless you, my dear, dear uncle, and His will be done!"

"Amen! And now, my dear, if you will call Sebastian, I'll be thinking of being off to the Duomo.

I feel as if I had talked myself better already; and I am sure my walk will do me good."

The stormy sea of tumultuous thoughts and feelings with which Marietta was left to do battle in the solitude of her chamber, when Sebastian and her uncle had gone out, may be readily imagined.

Was he going to be seriously ill? Was this the beginning of the end? Had her half-breathed prayers then been so soon heard? No! she had *not* prayed for her uncle's death. Her heart had expressed its wish amiss! Her prayer had been heard awrong! Yet, if her uncle coveted life only for her sake, and under the delusion of a mistake, it might be a happy release from infirmity and pain to come! Ah! could he but know all the truth! The dear loving-hearted old man! "No! I will make no prayer, save Thy will be done! Thy will be done! Oh God, Thy will be done!" And flinging herself on her knees by the side of her bed, she struggled to shut out all wishes and thoughts by forcibly keeping her mind within the refuge of that one safe anchorage; Thy will be done!

On returning from Vespers, the canon professed to feel much recovered. And the fevered look had left his cheek.

Ha! was it some watchful devil that dashed a pang of disappointment through her heart, and then tortured her with the consciousness of it?

That night Marietta spent several hours of it in her favourite haunt, the Lunardi chapel, in the church of St. Giacomo. In vain she tried to inspire herself with the belief that the spirits of her ancestors were approvingly conscious of her sufferings for the restoration of their name! All her soul was dark,

and in tumult. She felt as if she could not venture to allow her mind to formulate a wish, or utter a supplication, lest it should contravene a duty or be guilty of a horror. All her soul could do, was to cling, blindly, and with the desperate grasp of him who flies from his pursuer to the altar, to that refuge from volition, "Thy will be done!"

END OF VOL. I.

BRADBURY AND EVANS, PRINTERS, WHITEFRIARS.